

EVIL
DEAD

CHILLS





EDITORIAL

Writing an editorial for CHILLS could be a little predictable. I could simply list all the stories and say how much you will enjoy them (or hope that you'll enjoy them). But that is both duplication (of the contents page) and axiomatic (the stories wouldn't be here if we thought you wouldn't like them). So let me keep you here only briefly, to acknowledge and to thank all the writers and artists who performed to perfection, enabling Simon and I to put together this biggest issue of CHILLS. Read, enjoy, and send us your views.

Two more things before you continue... D.F. Lewis's "My Giddy Aunt" from CHILLS 5 was selected by Karl Edward Wagner for THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR, published by DAW. Well done Des.

The other: I'm entering a realm that's sure to produce a chilling fear in all sane folk - my house is up for sale. The for-sale sign has been playing sentry for a few months now - except when some passing morons set it alight one night. It burned fiercely, splattering blue plastic all over the gate, garden wall, and the London Pride (the sign is made of plastic, not hardboard, as in the old days). Three couples have visited the homestead, not to return - is the house that bad?

The point is, because I aim to be living elsewhere later this year, I am only providing Simon's address for all submissions, etc. To remind you, all manuscripts should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of the paper, with margins of 2.5 cm (that's about an inch); and do not forget to include your name and address on the title/first page. Remember to always keep a copy of your manuscript as we can not be held responsible for submissions that go astray. And when you do write, always include an sae or IRCs, and allow us a little time to reply, okay.

- Peter Coleborn.

CHILLS

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Back cover: "The Shadow from the Steeple" by Robert Bloch
Illustration by Jim Pitts

Additional artwork: Dallas Goffin, pages 2 and 35; Allen Koszowski, page 26; Martin McKenna, page 37.

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THE BIG OL' CLOWN LADY

JEFFREY OSIER

Illustrated by Jeffrey Osier

I WAS negotiating my way through the crowds at my ten year high school reunion, trying to establish or avoid eye contact as the situation dictated, trying to find as many different ways as I could to say the same exact things about myself to everyone I met, trying not to be smug or spiteful and trying not to notice these same attitudes in the faces I saw and spoke to - when someone, I don't know who, mentioned her name. I turned around, thinking it would be an old friend of mine, but I couldn't match the voice with any that I heard in the tight little conversational niches surrounding me. At first I tried to shrug it off and get back into the momentum of the proceedings. But soon I realised, there was no momentum. Not for me.

So I went out to the lobby and phoned Carla to see if she was feeling any better and to tell her what an awful time I was having without her. But even as I talked I could feel myself stammering and drifting. To Carla I probably just sounded a little drunk. But after I hung up and stood in the doorway, watching the reunion, I felt myself drawn away from this banquet hall, this body, this time. Suddenly, a memory dormant for twenty years was beginning to crack its way through the plaque built up over my childhood. So I left, went back to the motel room with a bottle of Scotch and a bucket of ice and just let that memory break on through...

The Big Ol' Clown Lady.

Ours had once been a small town spread over a generous expanse of farm land. Most of us were drawn there by the commuter line, the new housing developments, the new schools, the new mall. I was four years old when we moved there. Even at that age, so new and fresh to the town... to the world, I can remember seeing her in her hulking layers of brown rags, shambling about the streets like some gigantic Pliocene ground sloth, talking and singing to herself, leading a swarming retinue of chittering insects, dragging her long, canvas sacks behind her, filling the air with an aroma that to me, at that time, seemed to suggest not so much filth and decomposition and illness as it did a kind of mystery - the exotic, alien realm in which she dwelled.

Once I entered the school system I realised that everyone knew who the Big Ol' Clown Lady was, with her wide, weathered face laced with warts and always painted into a nightmarish caricature of an exotic model, lips and cheeks all red, eyes so tiny in their painted black pits. Kids told stories about her, threw stuff at her, and referred to her in all kinds of threats and accusations and unflattering comparisons.

Out off Route 31, in the long grasses that edged the forest, she lived in an old oil tanker. Its door was a jagged opening that twisted and stretched so far across the rust covered cylinder that

the whole place seemed ready to collapse. Surrounding it was her... I still don't know what to call it. From the road it looked like heaps of trash half-hidden amid the thick growths of weeds. From behind the big rock where we used sometimes to sit and watch her, waiting to see if we might witness one of the hideous and otherwise unbelievable actions attributed to her, it looked like a garden of robust, thorned plants that were thick and black like trees but twisted like vines or... contorted figures. And the contorted forms of these plants were mirrored in the strange statues that stood among them. Built from obscurely worked bits of garbage, these figures seemed to stand watch around her rusted tanker car, ready to leap to life were we merely to step out onto the other side of the rock...

Once I saw a boy strike her in the face with a thrown pop can. She rubbed her red cheek, smearing the red grease in streaks, glared with deadly ominous eyes at the boy and moved on. It was whispered for weeks afterward that this boy, a notorious eleven year old bully, would one night be dragged from his bed and minced into the Big Ol' Clown Lady's cauldron, which was rumoured to sit bubbling with unspeakable stew ingredients at all times within her rusting domain.

When, six months later, a different boy actually did disappear while on a Cub Scout outing, we all knew his real fate... and whose crime he'd been made to pay for. No adult seemed astute enough to follow up on this idea, however, and in the news reports that made it to television, her name was never mentioned.

Two weeks before I began the third grade, my mother died from a ruptured aneurysm in the brain. My father, still a very young man, was broken and helpless, and for months afterwards was subject to fits of weeping and muttering. With the assistance of visiting relatives and neighbours, my father and I - who perhaps needed each other more than anyone else - were separated with an almost clinical efficiency. I would go directly to our neighbour, Mrs Carver's house after school, where my Aunt Paulina would pick me up late in the evening and take me home, where my father sat, brittle and listless, trying to reach out to me from across the cold abyss of dead space between us, but never able to do more than smile and joke feebly with me in a thin, reedy voice that sounded less and less familiar every day. I wondered, as September darkened into October, whether any sort of normalcy could ever return to our lives, whether my Aunt Paulina would ever go home, whether my father and I would ever be alone together again - whether my father would even live out the fall and winter.

It was a warm Friday afternoon in late October when two friends and I went to a gas station on the edge of the old business district to buy bottles of pop out of the machine out front. It was a weekly ritual carried over from the summer idyll. We sat on the curb and listened to the foul-mouthed banter of the two farm boys who manned the gas pumps. On this day I was haunted by a dream I'd had the night before, in which my father - withered into a leathery, skeletal corpse - took me out to a grey, ominous sea on a rotting, rickety boat. He began telling me that my mother was one of the birds of prey that circled and squawked over our boat, and that if we couldn't find a way to trick her back into her grave, she would surely devour us.

I dreaded the sight of old Mrs Carver, Aunt Paulina and today, especially today, my father, so when my friends got up to leave I just sat there, thinking, trying to put something opaque between me and my dreams.

When the farmboy kicked my leg and told me I better be moving on I sulked away with my head down and hands in pockets, still trying to drive two images out of my head: the slight glimmer deep within the empty eye sockets of my father's face and the hideous grin on that bird face that kept swooping down at us.

It was an abrupt collision. She didn't see me and I hadn't seen her. I seemed to sink deep into the soft, dank layers of rags before I bounced back and fell on my butt, my palms slapping the pavement. There, on her knees, staring at me from behind the caked and crackling fields of red and black make-up, was the Big Ol' Clown Lady, growling out a stream of indecipherable curses. As she rose to her feet she feigned a lunge at me, cackling with laughter when I jumped back with a yelp. Then she stooped to pick up the garbage that had spilled out of her canvas sack in our collision. I just stood there, watching the gigantic brown back bobbing and the fat, scarred and warted hands pulling together the rags, bundled bookpages, bottles and cans. She gave me one last look - surprised that I should still be standing there - and then she limped on, away from the business district, out towards Route 31.

When I stepped away I kicked something into the street. It was a twisted, rusted scrap of metal that I realised must have fallen out of her sack. I picked it up and discovered that, in its intricate patterns, with its soft, membranous patches hidden deep within those patterns, it was far more than the rusted old can I had taken it for. As I held it close I heard a high pitched fluttering from within it.

I turned and saw the hulking back of the Big Ol' Clown Lady turning onto the lonely stretch of Route 31. But as I watched her I felt something wet slither and shiver in my palm. When I turned back to the thing in my hand it had changed its shape. Moisture was condensing along the thickest of its strands. Beads of water lined up in single file along each wrinkle. And now it felt less like rusted metal, as it seemed to be dripping, leaking into my palm, soft and limp like a soaked chamois.

When I turned back to the retreating old woman the fluttering whistle dropped into a mournful sigh. Without a thought, I began to follow her.

I was half a mile from the gas station when I first thought of Mrs Carver and Aunt Paulina and how worried they would be if I were to continue following the Big Ol' Clown Lady. And why, in fact, was I following her?

It would have been no use asking me why - better instead to ask the throbbing, sweating, restless thing in my hand, a thing which I now refused to look at because at last glance it had taken on the appearance of a living, self generating being. But there was no doubt that it was homing in with a desperate urgency along the same course as the Big Ol' Clown Lady, and that as long as I held it in my hand I was no more than its mode of transport.

Sitting up drunk in my motel room it was easy to ask myself why I hadn't just dropped it, but impossible to deny that although I had refused to look at it, I held it as tightly as it held on to me.

Because of her slow, shambling gait and because I ran part of the way, I caught up enough to keep a mere twenty yards behind her. If she knew I was there she made no notice of it. She never turned around or hurried or hesitated. When she veered off the gravel along Route 31 and onto the weed-lined path, and I came to grips with my destination, I hesitated, standing along the edge of the road and watching as she passed by the rock beyond which none of us



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had ever dared to venture. But the thing in my hand hugged and pinched at me, and I was forced to take a step, and then another, down onto the path, beyond the shelter of the rock, out to where the weeds grew into tall, twisted, leafless trees. The tortured stature of these growths was echoed by the mounds of trash that seemed to be impaled on and cemented onto thin rusted armatures, scarecrows which lured swarms of oversized flies. When I stepped too close to one of these figures an insect slapped my cheek, letting out a shriek as it bounced away.

I saw her disappear into the jagged tear that served as a door on her oil drum. I stopped again. A stream of foul air seemed to rush out of that black interior. The dread within me exploded out of my mouth and eyes as I looked at the rusted patches and streaks that stretched out over the surface of that drum. I turned away, trying to move my legs back in the direction from which they'd come. My hand and then my whole arm were raised against my will, and with my weeping face averted, I was led by the thing on the end of that arm. We stepped in through the rusty, jagged lips and stood in the black stench. I looked behind me, but the light that had delineated the edges of the tear was gone. And when I turned back there was another, smaller tear in the metal, and through this opening shone an ominous, brown-red light. I stepped up to this tear and looked out upon an expanse that bore a resemblance to that through which I had just walked, except that there seemed to be more life to the tree growths, almost a perceptible sense of movement among its branching tendrils. And the sky was the wrong colour.

We decided to step through this tear.

As I stood now in this new realm I saw pools of vapour and fluid float along the wrinkled brown surface of the canopied sky, a migrating school of liquid clouds that let out painful screeches as they made their passage. I saw the rich variety of red weeds that lined the path and the hideous grimaces formed by the petals of their flowers. Above and around me flew things that may have been birds or may have been very large insects, or both... or perhaps neither.

Lost within these riotous red growths were the garbage-muscled armatures, like twisted, dancing human figures reduced to foodstuff for the flying things who swarmed there.

I began to see patches of bone and meat, scattered remnants of human beings, and the reflecting carapaces of thousands of tiny creatures feeding on that meat, chattering away as they dug their faces boneward.

The path I was following led up an incline, a hill on which there sat a single regal figure - the Big Ol' Clown Lady - her brown rags now glimmering red, the frayed threads alive and alert and waving out from their fabric beds like a swarm of aquatic worms.

She was feeding as I approached her. As I climbed the hill I saw a twisted metal armature peering over her shoulder. The scraps of rotten meat and entrails and garbage on that metal frame were swarmed, and the glimmering carapaces created, with their restless movements, the illusion that flesh was bubbling to life and spreading over the rusted skeleton.

She was eating an arm, a small arm with a bandaid over the knuckle of the middle finger, a bandaid with an oil smudge on it, where I had brushed it on the pavement in my fall out in front of the gas station. I looked at my free arm and hand, and then at the arm from which she fed, identical in every way except that it was

torn away at the elbow, except that beneath the skin there was not me, my mind, my immortal soul, only meagre strands of red meat.

She looked up at me with those tiny, sunken eyes, folds deepening over them as her face contorted at me, flashing her crooked, bloody teeth, and hissing. She threw the arm down and reached for a thatch of hair that was connected to the severed head of a boy. I looked into that face and thought, so this is what I look like with my eyes shut. And in the instant I thought of it, its eyes opened in terror and looked straight at me, as those two rows of crooked teeth sank into the cheek and pulled away at it. As she cugged, the skin tore and I saw a line running up towards one of those opened eyes, and I thought, no, please, God, not my eyelids.

I shrieked when I saw her head jerk back, pulling the skin free. She smiled at me through her painted, bloodied face and held the head for me to see, asking me with her eyes, 'do you see? Do you know?'

The thing wrapped around my hand squeezed my wrist. I had actually forgotten about it. Now I held it out to her. It hung limp from my hand, a red, blood-dripping mass of flesh.

She looked at it, shocked, and then looked back at me, her whole expression changed, as though reading every thought, every memory out of me through this single gesture.

She set down the head gently and reached out with slow, trembling fingers as the thing stretched away from my hand to towards hers.

The transfer of that flesh, from my hand to hers, left me trembling in inexplicable ecstasy. She laughed to watch me quiver and I saw, beneath all that paint, the blood and the madness, a flicker of tenderness. These two - my orgasm and the glimmer of recognition that followed it - were to take me years to identify and understand, to a time when the event was no more than a dim, dream-like half-memory.

She took that dripping slab of flesh I handed her and tossed it over her shoulder, where it splattered and wrapped itself around the top of the armature. The arthropods all dropped or flew away, and the armature pulsed into motion as the slab took on the shape of a face.

Its eyes opened, looked down at me, stealing my attention.

"You! Boy! What do you see all around you? Food! Remember this! Your mind is the prisoner of your flesh, and the flesh of whatever will one day eat you as well as everything you have ever eaten. Food, boy! Next time you think of your mother, ask yourself what is eating her in her wet soily pit and what it's chosen to do with all those thoughts of hers."

And then the sinewy, bloody face exploded into laughter.

"Now! Go home and eat your dinner!"

I looked away, back to where the Big Ol' Clown Lady had sat, to where the pile of dismembered limbs - mine - had rested at her feet, but there was only another rusted, garbage laced armature; twisted, headless, lifeless. I looked back up at the talking face but it, too, was dead, the face no more than a shadowed glimmer beneath swarms of feeding arthropods.

I turned away, stumbled down the hill, covering beneath the screeching, wrinkled, milk-clouded canopy of a sky, my eyes averted from all that scattered, stinking meat, my mind whirling too fast to rest on a single thought. I worked my way along the path, trying to narrow my tear-clouded vision down to the piece of path where my foot would land next, trying to drown out all that buzzing and

screeching with the sounds of my weeping. Occasionally something big would swoop down near me and I'd feel the brush of its wings and think of my mother and the bird she'd been transformed into in my dream.

Soon I heard a rumble, a drone. Cars, moving down Route 31. I looked around me. I held up my arms and examined them. I was whole and alive and it was getting dark.

I moved quickly along the road after that, knowing I was in trouble, knowing that I had no excuse, no explanation, for my absence. But as I hurried I began to realise that, of course, there was no need to worry. My experience... down there, had been a dream, this hurrying, this realisation... it was all a dream.

And I as drew closer to home, to the light in Mrs Carver's living room, I realised the vastness of the dream, realising that all of this, extending - of course - back to the death of my mother, was a dream, from which SHE herself would awaken me.

But once inside Mrs Carver's house, examining in turn the fear, frustration and rage on the faces of Mrs Carver, Aunt Paulina and even my father, feeling the depth of illusion surrounding me, I began to fear that the dream was too tenacious to let go of me and that I was not to awaken for quite some time.

Which, of course, I did not. By the time I began to accept the fact that my mother was truly dead and buried and that her death was not just a dream from which she would awaken me, I had nearly forgotten the events which had triggered the conviction that I was just trapped inside a dream. I saw the Big Ol' Clown Lady again, frequently for a time, but less and less as she grew older and less able to move about the town. I always felt extreme physical discomfort upon seeing her, but I suspect now that through most of that time I did not understand the reason why.

Nor could I understand, lying there with my empty Scotch bottle, in my buzzing motel room, why the mention of her name should, twenty years later, bring this strange, unacceptable memory gushing before my mind's eye. But gush it did, as I sprawled there in the dark, the room spinning one direction, my body spinning in the other, while the darkness filled with visions of that secret realm the Big Ol' Clown Lady had shared with me, once.

The next morning, hung over, depressed, lonely for my sweet young wife whom I should never have come here without, I checked out of my room and stumbled to my car. I took a drive through town, past my old house and through subdivisions that used to be the farms and fields that had once separated us from the outside world. Somehow, I ended up on Route 31, moving even farther from the expressway ramp that would lead me home. I had to see... had to know that even there the relentless march of development had left its paved uniform traces.

But there it was, an outrageous incongruity, more overgrown with weeds than ever, so that it seemed to blend seamlessly into the forest preserve that it had once framed. I pulled the car over, got out and just stood there, searching for that path.

I found it, and further along found what I was sure was the rock we used to hide behind. How small we must have been for three of us to hide comfortably behind this rock. And then I went beyond the rock, where the weeds and trees seemed to blend into a pained, twisted landscape of crippled limbs and razor toothed leaves. Had a trained botanist ever wandered through this horrifying latticework? Hadn't anyone ever noticed that here, along this stretch of land, grew plants that surely grew nowhere else in the world? Or was it... me?

I scraped my jacket against a sharp tooth of rusted metal. It was one of the armatures, a bare metal statue, nearly swallowed within the trunk of a black, twisting tree. I looked around me. They were everywhere, obscured one way or another within or underneath the interlocked sea of weeds and trees. They still had an unsettling stature, mirroring both the shapes of men and the plant life around them. But they were small, and it was clear that they looked far less like humans than they did trees. Would I have even made this comparison had I not felt... known... of their secret nature?

The path led me directly to an open, desolate patch of ground, where I came upon an almost flattened sheet of rust, all that was left of the tanker drum, aside from the tiny, scattered specks of rust, ground into the grey earth.

I wandered back along the path, the whole experience and the memory that triggered it now overwhelmed by my intensifying hangover. I stopped and vomited up my entire fast food breakfast. When I finished I stood up with a throbbing headache, looking around at the path, the surrounding vegetation. I was on the wrong path. No matter, I supposed, I could still see Route 31 through the twisting black branches.

A bit further on I came across a bulldozer, tilted onto its side. Weeds spread over it and a gnarled tree sprouted up through the cab. Rust spread across the surface, radiating out like millions of capillaries, so that where the capillaries had not thickened into solid patches it appeared almost like a delicate, bloodshot membrane.

Within the darkness of that cab from which the small tree sprouted there seemed to be a sound. I approached and peered down through the broken glass, trying to identify that sound - when something flew out of it, striking my cheek. The sound continued, louder even as I moved further and more quickly away from that abandoned bulldozer.

I stumbled and fell upon a cracked and scattered slab of concrete. I stood, brushed myself off and took a good hard look around me. There were more of these slabs here, and another overturned bulldozer, its surface rusting away in complex, intertwining strands.

So they had tried. Perhaps more than once. What could possibly have happened here to stop them?

Her voice hit me like a wave, scraping through the rumbling concrete, hissing through the vegetation. Laughing at me...

I ran. I refused to look behind me, refused to look up at the sky which had been casting a grey pallor all morning but which now seemed to be turning the world into a sienna haze. I refused even to acknowledge the swarms of insects that were erupting at my feet, like razor-sharp cicadas slashing against me as they rose, their buzzes harmonizing with the pulsing droning laugh that chased me.

I could see Route 31 up ahead of me, but was I getting any closer to it? For a time, as the laughter got louder and the eruption of bugs grew thicker, Route 31 actually seemed to be receding. But then, just as I had on an afternoon twenty years before, I burst through that membrane and rose up onto the grey flat surface of Route 31. I leaned against the car and retched up... something... Had I been swallowing those bugs, somehow?

As I got in my car I looked up and saw a sign that I had not seen before. It informed interested parties that this land was for sale. It had probably once provided the phone number to call, but it was a metal sign and the whole bottom was rusted away. The rest

of it was covered with winding, hair-thin trails of rust that grew thinner as they reached the top. Monstrous weeds hugged at the sign from behind, threatening to pull it down into the depths of the Big Ol' Clown Lady's blight.

I turned the car around and drove down Route 31 towards the expressway. All around me were new subdivisions and shopping facilities and landscaped corporate headquarters. I kept telling myself, "See? See how tenacious we are? We build and overrun and wipe out and overcome..."

But Route 31 was an old road, pot-holed, whole slabs of it crackling away, and things, small black twisted things grew inconspicuously along the edges...

Someday, of course, that blight will be bulldozed away, muscled out of existence and be replaced by a mall, a country club, a housing development. Wouldn't it? How could it not be? How could it continue to grow thicker and darker and more out of place when civilisation was edging up against it, hungry for land?

I tried to tell myself it would as I raced down the expressway, looking in the rearview mirror constantly to assure myself that nothing was following me.

But something was wrong with the hood of my car, my six-month old Buick Regal. The front end was rusting away, and that rust was reaching out towards me, across the hood, like millions of tiny capillaries.

They didn't look much different from the thin trails of dripping blood I saw whenever I looked into the rearview mirror, blood that puddled and smeared and trickled across the meat of that hungry, horrified face.



COMPETITION

Grafton Books have kindly donated three copies of *SHADOWS IN THE WATCHGATE* by Mike Jefferies, each with a signed bookplate, plus a Mike Jefferies designed T-shirt. All you have to do to win one of these super prizes is to answer this simple question: In which sporting event did Mike Jefferies represent Britain in 1980?

Send your answers to:

46 Oxford Road, Acorns Green,
Birmingham, B27 6DT, UK... by
30th June 1992.

OUT OF THE STORM

RICK KENNETT

Illustrated by Alan Hunter

THE DESTROYER found her in the middle of the Indian Ocean, drifting bows down from out of a storm that had killed three other ships. Binoculars trained on her from the warship's bridge and they saw she was HMAS Barrinji, a minesweeper-corvette missing nearly a week. The destroyer sounded her siren, fired a blank shot.

No response. Barrinji, silent, dead, rolled to the troughs and crests, her bows lifting sluggishly, dipping deep. The ropes from the empty life-boat davits trailed in the water. The canvas flap of the door to her bridge slapped against the woodwork.

With her guns swinging through their arcs, the destroyer circled, then came abeam. Those on her bridge and lining her decks saw the ugly black gash behind the four-inch gun on the foredeck of the little ship. Grapples were thrown, clanking, catching, and Barrinji was boarded.

The first to hit her deck clambered downhill, forward to where the bomb or shell had struck behind the gun. What remained of the gun's crew was already black and drying, draped over the splinters of the deck and merging into the blast mark across the front of the bridge superstructure. At the bottom of the hole, not far below, oily water oozed around twists of jagged metal; and in odd, quiet moments something down there made soft bumping noises.

The others who boarded climbed upward to the tilted quarterdeck or down deep into the engine and boiler rooms, finding no-one; over hatch coamings and into echoing steel alleyways, finding no-one; wireless office, crew's space, lobbies, lockers, messes, wash-places, small arms magazine, galley, minesweeping gear store, fan room, wardroom, officers' quarters, finding no-one.

The hatch leading to the bosun's store forward was shut and dogged watertight. The First Lieutenant, a lean, tall man by the name of Dixon, stood beside it. He said, "What's it sound like?"

The seamen there had already pressed their ears against the steel, hearing only their own blood and breathing. Someone thought there was a faraway tap-tap behind the silence behind the hatch. But none of this was said to Lieutenant Dixon, whose short mouth and beard and close-set eyes seemed to fix his expression with a permanent What did you call me! look, regardless of the occasion.

A Leading Seaman cautiously said, "Sounds dry behind it, sir." He stood aside.

Dixon bent to the hatch and listened. "What about the seams and rivets in this bulkhead?"

"Dry, sir. Bone dry."

"Humm." He heard nothing that sounded like the sea sloshing around in there, though there was perhaps a rhythmic tap-tap somewhere in the muffled distance. "Everybody get back to the last compartment and close the hatch behind you."

Not being heroes or fools, the seamen did as they were told. Not

being a hero or a fool himself, merely the officer in charge of the boarding party, Dixon eased off the hatch's bottom dog-iron. He gripped the locking wheel central of the hatch and jerked it counter-clockwise, then kicked against the steel just above the coaming. No sudden wetness glistened on the bottom edge so he eased off the remaining dog-iron and inched the hatch open.

AN ELECTRIC voice crackled across the water. "What's it look like, Number One?"

Lacking even a loudhailer to reply, Lieutenant Dixon had to shout through cupped hands to his Captain as the destroyer steamed slowly down Barrinji's port side. "Complete derelict, sir! Boilers are stone cold, but the Engineer says about eight hours for a head of steam! She's all dry aft of the gyro compass room bulkhead! It's buckled and been shored up pretty rough. Could give way at any moment, so I'm keeping the bosun's store hatch clipped tight until we can get a better shoring job done!" He hesitated, glancing at the front of the bridge superstructure. "A steam hose would be appreciated, sir!"

"Understandable." The figure holding the microphone on the destroyer's bridge nodded, turned and spoke to others. The warship's engineroom telegraphs clanged flat notes on the still sea air and she slipped away from Barrinji at an increased speed to circle with asdic pinging the depths. It was unhealthy not to keep moving in these waters.

Dixon watched her glide away, all too aware of his sitting-duck status. Except for the four-inch gun which was smashed to uselessness, Barrinji's only weapon was a 40mm Bofors anti-aircraft gun on the boat deck aft. That and two 20mm machine guns mounted one on either bridge wing. The four-inch, he decided, could be-

He jerked about, startled by a sudden hollow hammering inside the dead ship. He relaxed. It was the damage control party reshoring the gyro compass room bulkhead. He returned his attention to the four-inch sitting askew and jammed on its mounting, its breech block shattered by the blast that had shattered its gunners. It would have to be cut up and ditched, which would help bring up her bows. They'd need that extra freeboard if Barrinji was to be steamed back. He tried not admitting it to himself, but he was unhappy in the knowledge that if they did get her underway he would have to captain her. He'd often dreamt of a command of his own, but this was a nightmare he'd not counted on. Down below the hammering abruptly stopped.

For a second Dixon thought the hatch had given way - and recognised in the thought an actual wish. But there was no crash, no shouts, no gush of rushing sea. A moment more and the hammering started again. He looked out over the near-sunken bows. Luck was with them. The sea was calming.

FOR WHAT it was worth, some-one said a prayer before the steam hose was turned on.

The job was done hastily and without further ceremony. Their captain was not one to be wanting his destroyer stopped with a hose pipe draped over the side for any longer than the grisly work needed. Neither radar nor asdic were returning echoes, but the sea was now unusually flat and the sky clearing. They were perfect targets.

In the Captain's Cabin aboard Barrinji, Lieutenant Dixon sat himself down at the desk to sort out the situation. In front of him lay a framed photograph face down. Without really knowing why he



Hunter

was doing so, he picked it up. It showed two naval men dressed in the tropical kit of short-sleeved shirts and shorts. One was a Lieutenant-Commander of average height and build, and who looked about forty, despite his boyish curly hair. The other man was younger, a lieutenant, rather lanky with a thin face and fair, receding hair.

With a shock Dixon realised he knew this man, had trained with him at a shore station before the war. For the life of him, however, he could not remember the man's name. Nevertheless, the photograph was a horrible coincidence in black and white. He dropped the photo back face down, wishing he'd never picked it up.

He returned his attention to the boarding party's reports. There were fuel-oil estimates, fresh water reserves, provisions, ammunition... There were the general reports about the condition of the ship as found: boiler room safety valve wide open; primer pins pulled from the depth charges on the quarterdeck, an Abandon Ship procedure so they don't explode as the ship goes under; all life jackets gone; sextant and log book gone; code and recognition signal books gone, probably dumped - another Abandon Ship procedure. In fact everything pointed to the orderly evacuation of a sinking ship.

And the Barrinji didn't sink.

A few minutes ago some one had noticed that both anchors were missing, and with them fathoms of chain, tons of weight which, Dixon told himself, might partly explain Barrinji's miraculous survival. But without engine power and a hand on her helm, he knew the little corvette should've broached to on the first storm wave and been rolled under. Strange.

There was a knock on the cabin door.

"Come," said Dixon; he was expecting the Engineer with a report on the pumps. No-one entered. "Yes, come in!"

Nothing happened.

"Damnation!" Dixon stepped to the door and wrenched it open.

In the lobby outside stood the lanky thin faced man of the photograph. The figure was shrouded in black, a cloak of darkness that made the thin bloodless face seem to glow. Dixon stood shocked, immobile as the apparition wavered to and fro like so much tossing flotsam. It swelled towards him, bringing a smell of cold dampness, until its face was pressed close into his.

"Leave!"

Dixon stumbled back, hit the chair and fell. He was on his feet again in an instant, but the doorway was empty. Feeling strange, feeling shaky, he peered into the lobby. It was also empty.

He ran up the companionway to the bridge and looked wildly left and right.

"Who came through just then?"

There was a seaman sweeping up smashed glass and there was a quartermaster tending the wheel in its surrounding metal box. They both fixed the officer with stares of surprise.

"Beg your pardon?" said the quartermaster.

"Don't come the innocent with me, Tyler!" Dixon snapped, slightly shrill. "I'll have you on report!"

"Sir... No-one's been through that door, sir," said the man with the broom. "Not since yourself, sir, five minutes ago."

The Lieutenant glared at one man and then the other as if daring either to make the slightest conspiratory twitch. "Mind your helm, Tyler!" He banged shut the door.

The Captain's Cabin was still empty when he returned. Nothing waiting, wavering, dark. But the lobby, an enclosed space between

cabins, was cold and smelt unnaturally damp.

THE CIRCLING destroyer had given those aboard Barrinji a sense of security, something they needed as the afternoon brought more blue skies and flat seas. The weather had made them nervous, and noticeably the most nervous was Lieutenant Dixon who suddenly developed the habit of glancing over his shoulder at nothing at all.

Except for some pumping which had had no effect on the ship's bows-down attitude, work was proceeding well. The anchor cabin winch had been unbolted and was about to be manhandled over the side. Oxy cutting gear had been ferried over by motorboat and demolition of the smashed four-inch was well advanced. A tarpaulin had been stretched over the punched-in deck.

"Steam pressure's building satisfactorily," said the Engineer above the hiss of the cutting torch. He paused a moment, wiping his hands down his overalls before adding, "Got the dynamo running now; there's power in the ship."

Lieutenant Dixon acknowledged this with a stiff nod. "How's the bulkhead? Will it take the strain once we get under way?"

"It should if you don't take it too quick: four or five knots should be all right. There's no leaks and the new shoring's holding up. But there's something knocking against that bulkhead; just every now and then a series of taps in the flooded compartments."

"What do you think it is?"

"I wouldn't like to say."

"Neither would I," Dixon replied, imagining. He glanced behind him. Nothing was there. "Bloody strange this ship, don't you think? The way she survived that storm with this sort of damage and no crew; the way everything points to the abandonment of a sinking ship - and then the ship doesn't sink. Bloody strange."

"I wouldn't have expected a ship damaged like this to have survived that storm, no." The Engineer had wondered about that, of course, though right now he was wondering why the First Lieutenant was talking as if accusing the ship of something like deception. "Just lucky, I suppose."

"Lucky," said Dixon to himself. Then, to the Engineer, "As soon as they're finished with the anchor winch, detail a couple of hands to dump those depth charges. Without their primer pins they're just so much amatol waiting on the quarterdeck for the first stray bullet. We won't be lucky forever."

At that moment the winch went over the side with a mighty splash and a cheer. The bows came up, though not by much. Half an hour later they came up more in a series of little jerks as the four-inch gun went over in four or five large slag-edged pieces. This also put the rudder and screws back deeper into the water, at the same time bringing into view a jagged hole blown out on the port bow. Some oil oozed, some flotsam drifted out. They waited and watched, but nothing more emerged.

Only later, when there was pressure and steam and the Engineer had intoned the formula, "Ready to proceed, sir," did anyone notice the ship's clocks. On the bridge, in the officers' quarters and Captain's Cabin, in the engine room, boiler room and wardroom, all these eight-day pieces had stopped at precisely six minutes past six, and no amount of winding, tinkering or swearing would make them work.

JUST ON sunset Barrinji turned to the south-east to begin a five knot waddle to Geraldton, a small port on the Western Australia

coast and at three hundred miles the closest harbour. Three to four days were estimated for the voyage, weather permitting. And if things got too rough there was always the destroyer's motorboat slung in Barrinji's portside davits...

"Bitch to steer," said Quartermaster Tyler, struggling with the wheel. The comment was uncalled for, despite its truth, though Lieutenant Dixon said nothing. He stepped out onto the port bridgeway to watch the destroyer, cut black against the afterglow, racing into the vest on her search for Barrinji's crew.

Night closed in over the little ship as she plodded on with only a brilliance of stars to light her way and magnetic compasses to guide her. The wind keening through the empty window frames sounded sometimes like lost voices and sometimes like a woman's crying, but hardly ever like the wind. It blew cold against the men at the engineroom telegraphs, the quartermaster wrestling the wheel, the young signalman standing at the back of the bridge in the dark.

Just before the 10 pm change of watch, Dixon went out again onto the bridgeway where the wind was honest from the sea and sounded that way. The foredeck below looked like a large triangle of shadow, flat save for where the wind rippled the tarpaulin. All he could see of the bows was that moment of white water as they nudged waves aside. He looked astern, past the single squat funnel, past their motorboat in the davits, past the minesweeping derricks on the quarterdeck, to the wake.

At five knots Barrinji was hardly churning up the water, making the wake hard to see, making it difficult to determine any doglegging. What he could see of the wake seemed straight enough, yet the more he looked the more he thought there was something wrong back there, some indefinite shape trailing in the water...

"Callaghan!"

The young singleman came scuttling up out of the dark. "Sir?"

"Lay aft. See if we're dragging something astern."

"Aye, aye, sir." The youth slid down the ladder to the main deck.

Dixon ducked back onto the bridge. "What's the helm feel like, Tyler?"

"Nothing different, sir," said the quartermaster at the wheel.

"Heavy handling, but that's nothing unusual."

Dixon grunted, stepped to the opposite bridgeway and looked aft. He thought he saw Callaghan at the stern rails, standing beneath the derrick booms which were crossed over each other like the resting hands of the dead. But it was hard to tell what was what back there among the paravanes, derricks, cables and winches. Besides, it was dark. And what was that thing in the wake? It was hard to tell.

"Callaghan!"

No one answered, nothing moved on the quarterdeck. Then he thought he saw a face appear briefly around the funnel. One of those manning the Bofors gun? He wondered about the face, and wondered why he wasn't certain who it had been. But who else could it have been? And where the hell was Callaghan?

"Callaghan!"

Again nothing happened while he waited half a minute.

Dixon put his head around the bridge flap. "Stop both- No, belay that!" He turned again as the bridge ladder rattled. Young Callaghan came up slowly, hesitant, looking confused. It was this about him which made Dixon hold back from upbraiding him, so that instead he asked with an odd sense of foreboding, "What did you see?"

Callaghan shuffled his feet and was unable to meet the officer's eyes as he said, "There's... there's nothing back there, sir."

Dixon peered aft. The water did appear empty now. Yet he was sure he'd glimpsed something... "All right. Get to the galley and fetch us all up some cocoa."

Dixon watched Callaghan descend the ladder again, not so spritely this time. Another long look aft showed nothing. He shrugged and wondered why Callaghan had lied.

FIFTEEN MINUTES before sunrise Barrinji went to Dawn Action Stations. Her three remaining guns were loaded, cocked and swung through their arcs, waiting. But the sun came up in a clear sky over a smooth sea to show an unbroken horizon.

The ship's clocks took no notice of time as watch followed watch throughout the day. It was six past six aboard Barrinji and that was that. A story was getting around that somebody had altered one of the clocks, tired of seeing its hands standing always in the same position; yet later it was found showing again six past six...

Late that afternoon a seaplane droned out of the north on an apparent interception course. Those who had them raised long-barrel binoculars to see the red ball insigna on the wings and fuselage. The plane came on at a steady speed, too high for their guns, closing until even those without binoculars could see the pontoons beneath its wings. A seaplane this far out could only mean a cruiser somewhere close by; 10,000 tons of brutal steel which might come prowling over the horizon at any moment.

"Stop both!" ordered Dixon.

The engineroom telegraphs rang. Barrinji lost way and stopped, small and quiet, showing no wake now. The plane's shadow flickered over the ship.

"He must be blind," some one whispered on the bridge.

But the plane droned over them, and five minutes later was a fading speck in the south.

"I'm taking a ticket in Tatts when we get back," said one of the telegraphmen and, on orders from the Lieutenant, pushed his lever forward to SLOW AHEAD.

Dixon sat down on the captain's stool at the back of the bridge as the wind picked up through the windows. Just lucky, I suppose, he recalled the Engineer's words of the previous day. A strange sort of luck, he went on thinking, to survive a storm and lose a crew. He couldn't help but think the word unnatural better described Barrinji's luck, and wondered what exactly it was he meant by it. Thoughts linked to thoughts, leading his mind unwillingly back to that wavering dark thing in the lobby. Leave. He'd been unable to deny to himself the reality of it the way he wished he could; at the same time he was unable to comprehend its reality. Leave. Why leave? Barrinji had proved a lucky ship so far for himself and his men, if not for the original crew.

"Lucky," he said softly.

"Beg your pardon, sir?"

Dixon almost jumped. But it was only Chief Bosun's Mate Frood - the Buffer - standing beside him in the gathering shadows and doing his job as the officer - an ad hoc officer - of this particular watch.

"Lucky," Dixon repeated.

"About the plane, yes, sir."

"About everything, Buffer. The plane, the calm seas, lack of enemy attention, the way she survived that storm damaged like she

is and with no crew."

"Yes, sir. Lucky."

The way he said it seemed to add, But not for her crew, and Dixon was about to ask him if he didn't think it an unnatural sort of luck when he decided not to do so. It would've been an odd question, especially coming from an officer and in front of other ratings. Besides, he wasn't really sure what it was he was getting at. So he said, "Get the chart and I'll check our course. Looks like we're in for another starry night." With that the subject of luck and lucky ships was closed, and with it any chance of talk straying close to dark things in lobbies.

After sunset Lieutenant Dixon took his sextant sightings on the starry sky he'd predicted and found Barrinji's position. Leaving the Buffer in charge, he retired to the asdic cabinet to sleep the few hours until then when his watch would begin.

The asdic cabinet, normally the noisy heart of anti-submarine activity, was a quiet, still cubby hole at the back of the bridge. The asdic set itself sat screwed to the bulkhead, its valve innards shock-smashed to uselessness, its earphones hanging mute upon a hook. The oscillating quartz crystal - the actual ping machinery - also lay dead, drowned in the flooded forward compartments.

Dixon sat in the operator's chair and slept.

Sometime later he awoke, or half awoke, to the distant voices of a man and a woman; fighting voices, thin telephone voices with no distinct words but full of blame, anger and fear. The woman sounded a hard bitch, iron hard, and the man dangerously close to violence. As Dixon opened his eyes the voices faded away, and in fading sped up like an old gramophone wound too tight too long. To Dixon the silence seemed worse than the voices because it was the silence of a dead ship creeping across the ocean when she should be naturally in her grave three miles down.

The bizarre fancy collided with his hope that the past few seconds with their inexplicable sounds had been a dream, just a dream. For a moment he thought the ship was dead and at the bottom of the sea, and that this thing carrying him back to safety and land was a ghost, the last mad wish of dead men in two storm-lost boats.

He banged his feet down on the deck. He was satisfied. Barrinji was no ghost. She was real, iron real, iron hard under his feet. Yet with his acceptance of the reality of the ship came the whispering memory of a darkness-shrouded thing. It was a memory, he knew, that would be with him always, locked away in a brain cell marked Do Not Disturb. It would do the disturbing, slipping out in the quiet moments or in his sleep to push up against his face again and whisper Leave. He wished he could leave. He wished he could pull the plug on this ugly little scow and-

"First Lieutenant, sir. Twenty-two hundred, sir," said a voice in the cabinet doorway.

"Very good, Buffer. Thank you."

Through the broken windows of the bridge the stars shone bright and sharp. The sea was flat like a table top. No enemy shouldered over the horizon in the night, nor during the next day. As though the war was somebody else's problem a million miles away, Barrinji steamed along at her five knot waddle, and the fine weather went on and on.

"What did you really see back there?" Lieutenant Dixon asked young Callaghan in the quiet of the bridgewing.

The signalman blushed. He was not a liar, not really, and Dixon knew it. "I saw boats," he answered simply.

For better or for worse, Dixon let it go at that.

DURING THE mid-watch of the following day, with the Buffer on the bridge, Dixon climbed down to inspect the bulkhead of the gyro compass room again. The wooden shoring braced and wedged against the buckled plating was still holding and all seams were dry. Nevertheless, the bosun's store hatch had been secured behind him. The Engineer had told him that the simple sit-down job of listening outside the bosun's store was unpopular with the men. Dixon didn't have to ask why. He knew.

He knew as he stood in that last dry forward compartment and listened alone to the oddly timed tap-tap inside the flooded spaces. He knew as he returned to the bosun's store hatch with the rhythm still with him. He knew as he stepped over the coaming and glanced back over his shoulder before slamming the hatch back into place. And in the crow's nest far above, the look-out rang down to the bridge saying, "Masts dead astern!"

THE ACTION Alarm had been ringing several seconds when Dixon hit the upper deck. Men were running, shrugging on life jackets, tying the chin straps of tin hats. The barrel of the Bofors angled upward. Cartridge belts were fed into the machine guns on the bridgewings. Sailors took up sheltered positions with Tommy guns in their sweaty hands.

Above the ringing of the alarm bell, somebody shouted from the boat deck, "Boat coming up astern, sir!"

He spared only a quick look behind him, glimpsing the smoke smudge of something far away coming up at a rate of knots. He spun and made for the bridge, thinking how bloody silly they all looked with what was approaching. And how bloody brave.

As he hit the rungs of the bridge ladder he yelled, "Shut that bloody bell up!" with a nervous vehemence that surprised him. The alarm cut off as the Buffer pushed binoculars into his hands.

"Looks like a destroyer, sir."

Even as he focused, Dixon was weighing up the chances of it being Japanese. Too near the coast, too far south... Seen bows on it was smoke and bow wave and precious little definite inbetween.

Signalman Callaghan had the only other pair of binoculars on the bridge. He said, reading a stuttering light from distant vessel, "Message from the Captain, sir: 'Don't shoot! Don't shoot! It's us!'" He lowered the glasses and with an inexcusable breach of discipline began to laugh aloud.

NOTHING HAD been found of Barrinji's crew or boats after a 36 hour search in screeching winds and crazy cross seas. "Damn queer!" said the Captain when Dixon told him of their continuing miracle of good weather. "We were battling heavy seas all the way back. Only struck calm water again half an hour before we sighted you."

They made port the next day.

When Barrinji was dry-docked and pumped out, a body was exhumed from the forward compartments. Lieutenant Dixon was not surprised to hear that it was the body of the lanky, thin-faced acquaintance from training. He didn't ask if it'd been found grasping a hammer or some such. He didn't want to know.

BARRINJI HAD been back in the war a couple of months when the convoy she was escorting was attacked in the night by a Japanese cruiser squadron. As the first shells screamed over, as the convoy began to scatter, Barrinji ran back down her course, making smoke,

firing her four-inch at ugly muzzle-flash silhouettes glimpsed at long range. Courageous and all in vain. It was a slaughter of ships. The convoy, the wallowing tanker, the slab-sided freighters, were torn apart - scattered wreckage quivering, burning, tumbling ruin to the bottom with their dead.

But not Barrinji.

Never Barrinji. Lit by fire and explosion, the little ship weaved through the monstrous shell splashes with her Bofors hammering mad traceries of red sparks into the night. Hull shuddering and boilers straining, her screws thrust her through the burning water until the drowning fireballs were far behind. Unnoticed, untouched, Barrinji steamed into safe enveloping darkness.

THROUGHOUT THE war Lieutenant Dixon followed Barrinji's fortunes, sometimes through official reports and signals, mostly through warroom talk with visiting officers from other ships.

There was the story of the submarine torpedo that, running beneath Barrinji, had struck the costal freighter she was escorting - a vessel with a shallower draught.

There was the story of the crewman who was constantly taking photographs of Barrinji's wake.

There was the story of the re-fitting dock gang who refused to work aboard Barrinji after dark.

There was the story of the native islanders who, when Barrinji anchored in their bay, were reluctant to paddle out to sell their fresh fruit the way they did with other visiting warships. "She sings and weeps much sad," they said.

There was the story...

Despite the odds and hazards, Barrinji spent the rest of the war either steaming uneventful patrols or being the only unscathed vessel in a bomber-savaged convoy...

ON A cold, drizzly day in 1961, Captain Dixon (retired) saw Barrinji for the last time. She was partly dismantled and riding high in the water, tethered to a buoy in a harbour backwater, waiting to be towed to the breaker's yard. Dixon stood on the shore beneath the trees and looked at her a long time.

Her mast was gone, as was the searchlight platform, the anti-aircraft guns, the depth charge throwers, the clutter of gear on the quarterdeck. Many of the bridge windows were broken, setting him wondering on what her interior looked like now. And what were those people doing assembling on her foredeck? Some of them, half naked, looked like seamen and some wore officers' caps, and all of them were transparent.

In front of them, by the cable winch, stood the lanky, thin-faced lieutenant dressed in tropical kit. He was staring forward, glaring forward with his hands clenched to fists at his side.

The rain squalled a moment, misting the ship from view. When he could see her again, Dixon also looked toward the bows.

The woman was ugly. Very ugly. A hag with scraggly, stringy hair, hands like vulture claws, a face in profile making Dixon glad he could not see it at close quarters. Her single grey covering was ragged and spotted with red. She stood at the very stem, braced against the jack-staff and staring back at the men like a cornered animal. And though there was nothing Dixon could hear save for the accelerating beat of the rain in the water, he could see she was screaming. Screaming like the damned.

JUNCTIONS

CONRAD WILLIAMS

Illustrated by Martin McKenna

MAYFIELD'S NOSE bled; that was the first strange thing. It had been twenty years since a well aimed punch brought on such a flood.

"Christ, boys. Hang on a mo' while I clear this up."

Murmurs of consent from Butch and Sundance; any excuse to stave some tea and flick through copies of *Men Only*.

Mayfield was a mess by the time he arrived at the Portakabin: arms painted with thick bands of red, tee-shirt speckled, lips smeared like some freak sun-worshipping vampire. This sudden glut of blood did not bode well - there was one possible explanation: he'd read of stress and its symptoms. Home was a spider's web of tripwires at the moment; he didn't know where to put his feet lest he triggered some vehemence. Jan was abandoning the menses, Karen about to embrace them and Adam ummed and ahed over how to announce his homosexuality. Mayfield felt like grabbing him by the shoulders and screaming, "I KNOW! JUST COME OUT WITH IT!" But hell, he'd do it in his own time - God knew it must be hard enough to come out of the wardrobe - or whatever the phrase was these days.

So what was this blood if not a purging of tension, a sign that it was all getting to him? Was it a sympathy process, his body proclaiming, Hey! I know how you feel, look, I'm bleeding for you? Or was it a reaction against the futility of his job, a statement of total contempt?

Mayfield had drifted into road maintenance whilst nursing greater ambitions. He'd thought, I'll slog at this while I work on *The Novel* then when I make it I'm free.

Now six years on, *The Novel* was eighty pages deep and accruing more dust than ink. Yet the dream lingered still, too ingrained to be rejected as pure fancy, despite the restrictions imposed by the cowboy firm he worked for. Take this job for instance. The three of them had been picked to come out here - some godforsaken netherworld a hundred miles from anywhere in Scotland - to work on a minor road for a thousand pounds each.

They'd already been hacking away at it for two weeks; it was like an unsupervised chain gang. No visits home; no car to take them to a pub; nothing. Only the ghost of a promise - it seemed like years ago - when the gaffer, Frank 'Cash Bandit' Holt, told them he'd pick them up in six weeks time. At the start it had been a great lark - a grand each for knocking a road back into shape. But all too soon had come the ennui, cabin fever, near depression. They were getting on each other's nerves for the stupidest things: coughing too loudly, scraping the chair on the lino floor, using more powdered milk than necessary. And in the mornings there'd be the road stretching ever onwards, like they'd been sentenced to eternal damnation and penance was a pick; home a portable hut with a cooker and stacks of pre-packaged meals.

Sufficiently cleaned, Mayfield stepped back outside, registering



the climb in temperature. Shorts and midriff soon, he thought, though looking at Butch's beer-gut didn't seem so appealing. Sundance, fingers digging at the denim clad cleft of his bottom, was pointing at an area where the vanishing point of perspective reduced the road to nothing.

"'S up?" Mayfield asked, touching his nose tenderly.

"Weirdest thing, Martin. Coulda swore... well, y'know y'get heat haze comin' off the tarmac? Well, Jeez - look now!"

Look he did but at first was blind to whatever had pricked Sundance's curiosity. Then out of the arbitrary shimmerings he saw - or fancied he saw - the form of a body drawn up into the sky.

"See it?" whispered Sundance.

"Aw, you're just lettin' your brains go bananas," said Butch, returning to his shovel.

"No... I see it too," said Mayfield. "It's amazin' isn't it? Like, y'can see witches in trees sometimes."

"Amazin'," chided Butch.

THE DAY after, their progress along the road going well, Sundance complained of blisters on his arms. They were large and blotchy like smears of jam beneath the skin.

"'S the heat, mate," observed Butch. "Bloody swelterin' innit?"

They were all agreed on this and by noon, their bodies drenched, they decided to seek shelter.

At the Portakabin, they broke open bottles of warm lemonade, fanned themselves with copies of Big Ones.

"Road's knackered. Doesn't look like it's been touched in years. An' there's bugger all traffic anywhere near it." Butch picked at a pimple on his chin.

"Yeah. Reckon we should contact Frank? Get some help in?" asked Sundance.

"Nah," returned Mayfield. "I don't fancy sharin' any more of the dosh out. I need it. And anyway, how would we contact him? Pigeon post? They'd probably only send Barker down."

Butch snorted. "Jeez, what a tosser he is."

Half an hour after they returned to work, Mayfield suffered another nose bleed.

"NOT HAD this many zits since I was a kid!" Butch moan.

"Shut up," said Sundance. "Not as if you've got a date or anythin' is it?"

"Sod off." Butch fingered the red lumps on his cheeks and chin with an expression approaching awe. "Bloody painful they are too."

Mayfield was pale this morning, his eyes puffy and bovine. Last night had been spent over the sink, nose gushing. Christ, he thought now, when am I going to get home and have a decent night's kip? This "special contract" was really cheesing him off.

And so was Sundance, who'd acquired the ugly habit of scratching his blisters and picking the debris from under his fingernails with his teeth.

"Aw come on, stop that. You've had breakfast," Mayfield yawned, stepping out into the sun - only the sun was blocked by clouds. Weird. It was hot and dry - no hint of moisture in the air - and his face felt instantly tight and shiny, as though someone had waved a blowtorch in his direction.

He had a total of three nose bleeds that day, almost keeling over at lunch time. On top of that, the road was becoming abysmal: huge cracks were appearing, slowing their labour considerably. And Butch was boring the hell out of them with his pseudo-intellectual

theorems about their afflictions.

"Well... like, all this malarky over the gaps in the ozone layer... an' the sun like, it's... they say it's a big nucklier 'splasion all the time. An' well, we could be exposed to radiation an' that..."

Nevertheless, they were subdued the rest of that day.

IN THE morning Mayfield fell at eleven, his nose pumping blood in an alarming torrent. They carried him back to the Portakabin, leaving him in the grip of a cyclical fever dream - a dream concerned with boiling roads along which endless chains of corpses travelled before entering a vacuum that plucked them into chasms in the ozone. When he awoke it was near dark and Butch, his face on fire, slept deeply while Sundance scratched and scratched...

MAYFIELD WAS much stronger after breakfast and helped with some light work. The tarmac was peppered with large holes as though bludgeoned by some mighty pickaxe. They'd all sloughed off weight but none had noticed - each filled with a woozy calm - so they shuffled onwards to the dancing shapes in the distance.

When Mayfield's nose leaked again he worked on through it. Butch's face was like a spicy soup, weeping fluid, but he kept going, drunk on the heat. Sundance too, arms wet and shining (there were blisters on his neck and shoulders now) persevered.

And as daylight faltered they continued, shambling into the night.

BUTCH WAS the first to go. He was in front, tripping over the breaches in the road. A cry flew up; Mayfield glimpsed him snatched like a toy, hair aflame, into some invisible hurtling slipstream. Then he was gone.

"S... Sundance. See that?" gasped Mayfield.

But Sundance was laughing, his eyes dark, his wasted body shuddering with the effort. His head bobbed as though supported by jelly.

"Butch found Wonderland!" he sang over and over. He dropped his tools, sprawled into the maelstrom.

Alone, Mayfield swayed beneath the scorched sky, his nose a congealed mess spilling gore onto his shirt. A smile played for second along cracked, swollen lips. The breeze smelled electric: a breeze from the deserts of hell it seemed.

Now and again he saw the same golden ripples waxing before him like spangles of sunlight into faces - some woeful, some laughing and beautiful.

Like this one: a young woman in white; black eyes, black hair and a smile that made Mayfield's heart jerk. She was blowing hot, slow kisses.

He dropped his spade. What a thing... to travel with the dead. "Aah, beauty..." he whispered, and pitched forward, arms reaching...



SPIRITUAL RADIO

MARK RAINEY

Illustrated by Bob Covington

"IN EVERY dream there is a conflict. Man's natural tendency is to run from a threat rather than face it. At the end of this course, you will not only be able to analyse and understand the nature of your dream conflicts, you'll be able to send them packing."

Dr Jess McEntee

Ferrum College, VA

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HERE I go.

I'm dreaming again, just as I have for the past three nights. It's unusual for me to have such crystal clear images, the sights, sounds and odours all as real as they would be to my waking senses. Just as unusual is the fact that I can lucidly state, "This is a dream," and know in my soul that it's true, for even though my body and mind perceive my surroundings with a sharpness beyond the norm, there is no mistaking this for the "real" world of daylight. The analytical part of my mind is a constant, serving to assure me that these dreams are illusions, regardless of their power to tempt my emotions and my intellect. Each night I seem to be drawn more deeply into this strange realm, in a way that's never happened to me before. I don't understand it, but I don't fight it, for to do so would mean staying awake, and I'm just too tired to handle that right now.

A large green field has materialised around me; it looks like a golf course. Natural enough, as the game is a favourite pastime. I see lots of woods at the perimeter, a creek, a long downhill slope, then a dogleg to the left. I'm standing at the top of the hill, alone, seemingly. I can hear birds calling, and - I think - a distant train. The scene is familiar, though I can't place the exact location. My head is a little woozy, but that will clear up in a minute, if this dream is true to the pattern of those from the past few nights. The entry into dream-sleep seems to have a temporarily disruptive effect on the semi-circular canals, therefore on my sense of balance. Yes, focus is slowly becoming sharper and my head is now as steady and clear as if I were really standing in this image's physical counterpart on a Saturday morning.

Most often, my dreams are a muddled network of sprawling visual impressions, sounds, feelings of pain or ecstasy, all more or less random, usually interconnected only loosely, if at all. They come in a tide, and I am generally swept along with it, the few choices I ever make insignificant or meaningless. There is none of that ineffectuality here. I have a will, a power in this world that is mostly unfamiliar to me. In college, thirteen years ago, I took a few courses on dream analysis and control, wherein the student

learned to utilize his power of choice in the sleeping world, which theoretically would be reflected in bolstered self-confidence in waking life. The control process worked well enough - it did indeed assist me in standing up to the conflicts generated in dream-sleep, though the side benefits, those in the world of light, were nebulous at best. I haven't practiced dream control in years, so I am again puzzled by my new ability to move through this place, not necessarily as its master, but not entirely at its mercy. I have choices here: I can wait here until something happens. And the one thing I can be sure of is that something will happen. I can't alter what is to come; I can control my reaction to it.

I start walking down into the dogleg which is filled with white flowers and lush green clover. The sweet aroma is almost overpowering, and exhilarating, for smell is a sensation usually muted or non-existent in dreams. But I know that soon, that famous dream conflict is bound to manifest itself in major league terms. It has happened quite regularly during my last periods of sleep, and there is every reason to believe that the same will happen again tonight. Possessed of this peculiarly heightened confidence, I don't feel afraid, as I sometimes do in dreams. My old professor, Dr McEntee, would be proud of me if I could relate this to him now. I should remember to write this dream down when I wake up, for the first step in mastering the art of control is to record all observations, then analyse, and finally, manipulate. I haven't tried it in an awfully long time.

"Mark!"

It's a familiar voice, though not a pleasant one. It's low, almost a hiss, with just enough gravel in the throat to give it an ominous edge. I turn, finding myself staring at Raymond Barton, the bane of my youth, a hybrid punk rocker/redneck whose every interaction in my young life had resulted in nothing but trouble. He's straddling a wooden fence that runs parallel to the fairway until it disappears in the distance. He looks out of place here - feels out of place. Dream characters, events, settings, are all supposedly symbols of greater things. Is Raymond a symbol of some deep-rooted fear, or does he just represent himself? His presence conflicts so strongly with the tranquility of the setting that the land itself begins to change. Behind him, a row of dilapidated buildings has replaced the verdant trees, and a low wind rumbles in my ears that overshadows the calls of the birds.

"What the hell are you doing here, Raymond?" I am curious, because I haven't seen the real Raymond in ten years, have barely even thought of him in all that time.

"Hell, I don't know," he says with a hard stare from beneath shaggy brows. "Do I have to have a reason for everything?"

Ah, a familiar remark from a long ago. I would like to say, Hell yes, if you're going to invade my dream, but I rather lamely reply with a soft, "I don't suppose you do." Just like it used to be. Yeah, that's me, the Man in Control. Raymond's eyes gleam contemptuously.

"Where are you going?"

"Anywhere I want," I say, trying to show a little more assertiveness. It takes some practice to master the process of control, especially when confronted immediately by an undesirable symbol (if that's what he be). His expression of reproach does not does not soften. It's the face I remember most about him. I flex a mental muscle, forcing myself to shed the intimidated feeling which Raymond has always instilled in me. I remind myself that this is my dream, and he's only in it as long as I allow him to be.

I begin walking again; he keeps pace two steps behind me, saying nothing. The grass around my feet has grown taller, and now there are crumbling hovels on either side of us. They crouch in dark mystery like ancient carcasses, some of them emitting sounds of life: coughing, broken voices, rattled breathing. From the door of the nearest, a withered figure suddenly steps forth: an elderly man wearing ratty clothes, his disheveled white hair dangling into his face like dirty yarn. He gazes at me for a moment, his eyes dark and hollow, his mouth fixed in a grim sneer, lower jaw somewhat askew. I don't recognise him. He looks like a walking corpse, his skin a pale greyish tone. I stop, glare back at him as if I were regarding an animal in a zoo. I should feel moved to pity, yet I am filled only with disgust.

Seemingly comprehending my feelings, he takes one step closer to me; his face seems to grow in proportion to the rest of his body. Then, from his throat, a deep, snarling, "GHAAAAHH!", spat at me with fury.

I leap back, nervous, but not frightened. I expect this is an externalisation of my feelings towards Raymond. The old man retreats into the darkness of the hovel.

"You know," I say, "if I were poor like these people, I wouldn't live this way. I'd go live in the forests. Hunt. Build a cabin. Make my own way. These are parasites. They're your fault."

"Is that how you see me?" Raymond asks defensively, giving me that cold eye. His look demands an answer.

"Maybe not now. But one day, you'll end up like this."

"Why did you come here? You're free to pick and choose your pathways."

"I don't have the foggiest idea."

"You don't know where the hell you're going. How about in the outside world? Any thoughts, there?"

I shake my head. Here, the "outside" world feels like something small and insignificant; a stable place, comfortable because of its rigid sets of physical limitations. Some people believe that the dream world is just as real a place, and that the soul's extraordinary sojourns are as much true life as the walk around the park you took this morning. Those you meet, the experiences you have, the sensations that occur, all define a separate, but just as factual reality. Whether or not this is true, I've never felt qualified to say.

To iterate such thoughts to Raymond seems pointless. I turn my attention to the dreamscape again. In the distance, I see a tall framework tower, a radio antenna, rising high into the deepening sky from beyond a ridge of trees ahead. Some would say it's a symbol with sexual significance.

"Guess what that's supposed to mean."

"Don't start with me, Raymond. We'll go that way."

"We?"

"I will go that way. You can go wherever you damn well want to."

"I'm coming with you!"

"Thanks. Thanks a lot."

I see a path now that leads towards the antenna. We follow it, passing many areas of dense foliage, tall trees and scattered piles of trash that I reckon have come from the hovels. I look back once and they are gone, having been replaced by row upon row of electrical towers and power lines. Dozens of high tension wires pass directly overhead, leading toward the antenna. As we walk, I see how tall it really is - many hundreds of feet. At its pinnacle,

a cluster of orange and red lights blinks slowly off and on, illuminating the rapidly darkening sky. I feel drawn to it, as if it represents an answer to some unknown question. Raymond remains behind me, silent, making me nervous with his very presence.

"What do you want, Raymond?" I finally ask.

"Oh, nothing, not really. I'm just here for the ride."

"A picture of brilliance," I mutter. As ever, Raymond shows wisdom beyond his years. I decide to ignore him and maybe he'll go away. I wonder if I could merely wish him away..?

No such luck.

I walk faster, but my destination seems to remain at a distance. I now feel a strange urgency to reach it, though what I'm supposed to do or find when I arrive is wholly unclear. I decide to try something new: I stop walking. Raymond's footsteps behind me also cease. I raise my arms to my sides, take a deep breath, and - push - with my mind. My feet slowly rise from the ground, floating up and back until I am hovering spread-eagled six feet above the dusty path. The sensation is relaxing, and I have to wonder why I don't do this more often in waking life. It takes several moments to occur to me that things don't work that way. I propel myself forward with a quick little notion, and I'm now moving slowly ahead, floating on a cushion of air as if it were water. While I'm only a short distance above the ground, I feel secure and comfortable. I look around, and Raymond, my loyal companion, is drifting just behind me.

"Raymond," I say, "you're a real jerk."

"Eat shit."

The sky is now very dark, but close to the ground, I can see quite well. At least the tower seems to be attainable, but its height has become dizzying. For a moment, I feel as if I'm going to lose all balance and topple back to earth.

So. Obviously, a challenge. I'm brave, I'll take it on, though the thought of what I'm about to do makes me quail. Regardless, I coil myself into a tight ball, grasping my knees, lowering my head so my chin nearly touches my collarbone, and - hey! For the first time I notice what I'm wearing - an all black tunic, like a Chinaman's. Okay, fine, so I don't have any clothes like this in my closet at home. Anyway, now I spring upward, arms at my sides, legs trailing. I rocket into the sky at an uncomfortable velocity, so I force myself to slow down. The world below is suddenly a vast panorama of lights, roads, trees and buildings. It looks like a large city, though I can't recognise any features that might reveal it to be a familiar place. I'm hurtling toward the top of the tower, which seems to grow even taller as I rise. A stiff wind is blowing up here, making me feel that I'm moving faster than I really am.

I look up. The apex of the tower seems to disappear into a hole in the sky, as if leading straight into outer space. The earth is now so far below that my stomach chills. What if I should suddenly lose my power of flight and plummet to the bottom? Would I die in my sleep? I shove the idea out of my head, for there's no surer way to make something happen than by thinking about it. Everything in this dream so far has been reconcilable in my psyche. The hole is not - it represents a threshold I do not want to cross, as if it's something that exists independently of my imagination. I'm afraid if I keep going, I will no longer be in control. I manoeuvre close to the antenna, reach out and grab one of its metal struts. Weight gradually returns to me, and I cling to the structure for dear life, like an insect on a wall. Something rumbles in the sky, and



looking into the hole, I see a dark shape roiling amid broken clouds, so indistinct it's impossible to identify.

Raymond appears at my side, his expression one of wry amusement. "Acrophobia?" he asks.

"I've felt more comfortable."

"Why don't you keep going?"

"Thank you, no, as a matter of fact, I was just thinking of heading back down, very shortly."

"You chicken shit!" he says with cruel mirth, his lips curling into his most obnoxious grin. "You get beat pretty easily, don't you?"

"Beat?"

"Yeah, running away instead of driving ahead. How typical, you dip."

That's the old Raymond I've always known and loathed, an arrogant, conceited ass, who unfortunately is just stupid enough to do all the things he dares others to do. He leaps into space, then rises slowly towards the opening above. The wind drills at my gripping hands, and a faint vibration of the metal tower seems intent on loosening my fingers. I don't like this dream. It's carrying me a directions I shouldn't be going. I want to wake up.

Raymond has disappeared into the distance above, and a vast roaring sound echoes from that hazy portal. Can this indeed be something from outside my subconscious? I've dreamed of awful things before, shocking and terrible things, but I've always accepted them as cathartic release for the various and sundry negative tenants of my mind. This thing seems utterly alien, a symbol of something that surely can't have anything to do with me.

"MARK!" blares Raymond's disembodied voice, at a painful decibel level. "MARK!"

I want to wake up now. Raymond, the familiar, if distasteful, has become Raymond the terrible. He used to intimidate me. Now he scares me. I want out. Sorry, Dr McEntee, I don't want to be a wimp.

Wake up.

I'M IN my bedroom, lights out except for the small nightlight in the adjoining bath. It's quiet outside, with only the occasional rumble of a passing car. I feel warm beneath the blankets, but inside, a chill has seized me. It takes a few moments before I remember anything of the nightmare. God, no wonder I'm frigid. I look around the bedroom. The clock reads 1:30 am, its muted ticking in syncopated rhythm with my pounding heart. What's this? On the nightstand is a pen and an open notebook. I pick it up, study it in the near-darkness. There's a scribbled account of my dream up to the point where I awoke, detailing the golf course, Raymond, the hovels, the old man, the tower. I don't remember writing down this dream.

I didn't write down this dream.

Which can only mean...

I'm still dreaming. Damn it.

I pull myself from the bed, go to the window and lift the shade. Yes, there it is: the tower. Distant, but prominent against the midnight blue sky. Its anti-collision lights blink coldly amid the thin clouds, and I see now that what I had thought was its apex is merely a mid-point.

Just a damned minute.

I was just in my...

I am now floating alongside the tower, rather than viewing it

from my bedroom window. Raymond is hanging onto one of the crossbars, smiling at me with his customary expression of belligerence.

"Raymond, why don't you go home?"

"Not as much in control as you thought, huh? Pretty rude awakening, huh? Pardon the bad joke."

"You're such a creep."

"Getting a little hairy for you? It happens. Things start out familiar enough, then get weird, then get downright terrifying. Happens in dreams all the time. Doesn't it? DOESN'T IT?"

It's time to start thinking. I realise I'm letting myself be manipulated again - flowing with the tide, as usual. It's not so easy standing up to these things, so don't sit out there being judgmental. It's no easier to be creative, or witty, or spontaneously decisive in dreams than it is when you're awake. It is easier to be honest. In dreams, your emotions are purer, because they supercede your intellect. You don't let that happen so much when you're awake.

"So, Raymond. What the hell is this thing?"

"The tower? Oh, it's a hunk of metal and glass, hooked up to electrical circuits for broadcasting and receiving."

"Broadcasting and receiving what?"

"Oh, all kinds of nice stuff. You know, things like... signals."

"God, you're a jerk. What kind of signals?"

He points to the hole in the sky. His voice lowers to a sly whisper. "Signals to and from... THERE!"

"Where is THERE?"

"Up."

"Go to hell, Raymond."

"Eat shit."

I look down. Big mistake. I can see the vast sea of lights only through a broken cloud cover. I don't like being this far up, not at all. But as I float here, a brilliant, if morbid idea strikes me.

"Bye, Raymond."

I relax my mind completely, snap the wings of thought that hold me aloft. It works. Suddenly, air is rushing past me, slapping at my face, and the illuminated landscape comes rushing at me. Always, always when I'm falling in a dream, I wake up just before I hit bottom. I do so want to wake up. I mean, I really want to wake up.

I begin tumbling, all sense of balance gone. My head reels with dizziness, but I perceive that the ground is rapidly approaching. Make no mistake, I feel an almost heartstopping terror as I plummet. What if I don't wake, just die as my dream body connects with the ground, with the illusory fragments of my brain splashed all around me like the pulp of so much watermelon? I avoid this line of thinking, focusing on the moment when the jolt of impact sends my eyelids flying open, and I find myself happily awake in my bedroom.

Only seconds away now. Dark tarmac whirls towards my eyes. I hear a clanging in my ears like a fire alarm - it's my heart, who is less sure than my brain that I'm about to wake up. I clench my teeth, praying, now that it's too late, that I made the right decision. The moment of reckoning is at hand.

The moment of reckoning is incredibly soft. Acceleration ceases, the whirling winds to a halt, and the rush of air diminishes to silence. I am filled with an immediate cold dread, because it doesn't take a fraction of a second for me to realise that I'm

hovering six feet above the ground, spread-eagled comfortably on a cushion of air that lacks the courtesy to allow my passage through it.

Raymond is beside me again, and his face is absolutely swollen with fury. "That wasn't smart," he hisses.

"It was worth a try."

"Clever," he concedes, "but stupid. If this were simply your own dream, it might have worked. But not now."

"What's that supposed to mean? This is my dream."

"Correction. It was your dream. It started out as yours, then we intercepted it."

"We who?"

"We," he says, pointing to the chasm to which the tower leads.

"Up there."

"You cretin."

"Dip shit."

"What kind of signals does that thing broadcast?"

"Our kind. Not the kind you pick up on a regular receiver." He taps his forehead. "But on this kind."

"Are you saying you're not just a product of my subconscious?"

"Bravo, man. You're not as stupid as you look."

"Jackass."

"Shithead."

"So, I suppose you're just a symbol, rather than who you appear to be. That makes you pretty two-dimensional."

"If you like," he says with a shrug. "It doesn't matter. We've been drawing you out. Why do you think everything's been so vivid the last few nights? Your dreams were intercepted, and we're going to keep them."

"You won't be waking up any more, I'm afraid."

"Go on!"

"No, really! Try it."

Now, I'm a little worried. During our chat, we seem to have drifted higher and higher. The opening in the sky is huge now, dark, and forbidding. I again sense a movement in it, something obscured by the thin clouds that float slowly past. "Where does that lead?" I ask. "What the hell is that?"

"That's the hole in your head where the rain comes in," he laughs. "That's where you stop and we start."

I realize as I watch him that Raymond's body seems to be losing something, as if he's beginning to vaporize from within. His limbs curl awkwardly, and his head shifts strangely to one side, so that a single, glaring eye is now focused on me.

"Raymond, just what the hell are you?"

His arms and legs begin to jerk spasmodically. The head, which no longer resembles the Raymond I once knew - barely even looks human - continues to twist around, but the eye doesn't move. It keeps staring, at me, through me. The eye grows larger, while the body seems to elongate, then dwindle, becoming insubstantial. Then, the reddish orb is all that's left.

Strange hues of blue and violet dance around the tower, and the now-pulsating eye begins rising toward the space above, and I hear sounds, with the rhythm and flow of voices, yet with a timbre unlike anything human. The "real" Raymond Barton, wherever he might be in the "real" world, was never in this dream of mine; he was merely an image plucked from my head, an instrument used by something else to intrude on my subconscious.

Indeed, if the dream universe is as real to the spirit as the physical world is to the flesh, then it is inhabited by something

that is certainly not human...

The tower quivers, as if it has been struck by some huge object. I rush towards it, gripping one of the beams in my hands. I focus every erg of dream power I can muster, twist, pull, thrust. The strength flowing through my arms is superhuman, born of terror, yet my efforts are fruitless. The great antenna is simply too alien for my mind to affect. I reluctantly release my grip, and again will myself to fall, hoping only to buy time. Below, the landscape has been decimated by a thick mass of dark clouds.

I remain supported in space. I am no longer under my own control.

Above, I hear a rumble, and daring to look up, I find myself suddenly stricken with an unearthly cold. My heart nearly explodes, and the sound it makes rings in my ears so that I'm painfully deafened. Wake up, I order myself; uselessly, for all my wonderful dream abilities are now impotent. I'm being drawn upwards, and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

Then at the fringes of my consciousness, I perceive a familiar voice. "Mark," it says. "Mark, wake up. What's wrong with you?" It is Sherry, my wife. For a brief second, the view of nearing abyss and the tower fades to a misty grey, and a surge of hope drives me to try again to wake myself. But then the dream becomes all there is once more, and Sherry's voice trails away, taking with her my only link with whatever I have ever perceived as my true life. My God, she's gone.

Gone.

From the hole in the sky, a sound like thunder shakes the tower, and I reach for it, trying to grab hold to halt my ascension. No way. It's beyond my grasp. A movement overhead draws my attention upward.

No, this all must be a lie, a joke perpetrated by some sick part of my brain. The chasm above is widening, revealing the shadows of a whole new reality, shadows that are beginning to grow clearer as walls of the sky - my sky - start to crumble. The tower, no longer a necessary tool of whatever is out there, comes apart at the seams, its silvery steel lattice-work floating upward in twisted shards. The landscape below is gone, now merely a vast abyss, colourless, without form.

This is just a nightmare; it has to be a nightmare. I will awaken. I know this simply because there is no way that I can remain asleep as that monstrous, gaping maw, revealing countless ruined dreamscapes, widens to receive me and mine.

Here I go.



LOST CHILD

D.F. LEWIS

THE RAMBLING house rang with the sounds of children. If there were any grown-ups in attendance, the man thought, they certainly did not make their presence felt. In fact, the party was evidently at its height, since two girls in pinafore dresses, of indeterminate ages, leaned from a precarious balcony, holding funny hats tight to their heads in the late afternoon breeze.

A boy blew a squeaky toy from one of the many attic windows - his shouts could not be made out from the distance of the summer pagoda which some ancient folly of a person had seen fit to have erected beside the Green Lake (where the man now sat). The boy who was dressed in a sailor's tunic seemed an echo of the man when he was twelve. He waved but, surely, he couldn't be seen.

Eventually, the boy vent inside away from the edge of dusk.

The man imagined a sexless creature, with a blackened face, extruding from one of the chimneypots on the vast roof's staircase stacks. It held up a windmill toy with butterfly sails which the man guessed must be spinning like mad in the picking-up breeze.

Inside, there would no doubt be several other children in party dresses, bibs, tuckers, playing the whole house for its every nook and cranny. Hide and Seek, Pass the Parcel, Musical Chairs, Hunt the Thimble, Postman's Knock, Forfeits, Dressing-up...

Oh, the man would simply have loved to join in - like a drowner, grabbing his second childhood hook-line-and-sinker.

When a kid, he had discovered great delight in Mother's dressing-up trunk. She allowed her children to rummage through it of a wet Sunday afternoon.

Just as they had given up any hope of the weather improving, the late sun would suddenly shaft across the loft from the skylight, picking out the man as child in some ancient she-cousin's coming-out dress, billowing around his ankles in gossamer seas of endless childhood's dream. By comparison to the nip and tuck of tunic trousers, he had never felt so good, so liberated.

The others would toss about the kaleidoscopic flotsam of fabrics, frills and Fairisle wool.

Mother would laugh upon seeing them all dressed up, their eyes engorged with sunset. His older sister was Lancelot of the Green Lake (done up fittingly in Grandpop's old fireguard, with see through body tights beneath); the other sister strutting the loft as a Queen, in milk-edged robes of royal blue satin, under a crown of captured sunlight. But he would always earn Mother's warmest praise, as she tied a pink ribbon in his hair.

Tears at his eyes, the man saw another girl in flowing twilight lace join the other two on the tiny balcony. She waved, as the man waved back simultaneously from the pagoda. She'd been discovered in the unlikelyst of hiding-places, he mused. But nobody knew who'd found her, since a Seeker had not yet been appointed officially, he was sure.

His mind wandered further as the evening drew in and he saw

evidence of high-banked fires curling from all the chimney-pots.

HE SHUT himself in the broom cupboard as the best possible hiding-place from the Seeker. Best in the sense that he did want her to find him at some stage... but not too easily.

Some of the other children would probably be now ensconced in outlandish places (it being a very large house), perhaps never to be discovered.

He could hear her counting in the distance, missing out numbers here and there, either as a joke or, maybe, evil. He laughed. The cupboard was stuffy and muffled his noises.

The counting ceased at an unround number. "COMING - READY OR NOT!" He listened to her feet scampering away into the further reaches of the house.

He was surprised to hear an immediate rattling at the broom cupboard door. At first, a gentle teasing of the play in the hinges, gradually becoming more insistent...

His surprise quickly turned to fear. This surely could not be the official Seeker, in body tights. Fear, once formed, quickly hatched the twin fiends Despair and Terror, a dark-derived symbiosis which resolutely took sway.

"Lardy-Dar, Lardy-Dar." The voice was outlandish, making him think it was a broom or other sweeping implement trying to return to its lair, the cupboard. He laughed... and cried.

The house was suddenly quiet.

He tried to stop breathing to see if he could hear the intruder breathing. Intruder did not seem the right word, but strange words of which he knew no meaning already passed through his head, pretentious words, silly words. How did you pronounce symbiosis, anyway, let alone spell it or understand it.

The nursery rhyme of which he had just caught a line was not one Mother had read him. It must be another Hider in the darkness, fresh from covering the skin in soot.

"Lardy-Dar, Lardy-Dar."

A fraught calm before the storm.

HE WAS now a man, grown out of such games.

To grow out of things is a strange expression. Most people, if they but knew it, grow from things.

"Lardy-Dar, Lardy-Dar," he hummed, as he left the pagoda.

The creature inside his body sometimes turned over in its sleep: the child he once was or something far worse?

How do you spell fraught?



SHADOWS

RICHARD COADY

Illustrated by Dave Carson

It seems that the problem is very deep
Coz every time I try to sleep
I have nightmares...
... but what worries me, man, is when I wake up
And it might be worse...

"Nightmares", Violent Femmes

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THE SKY was wrong. It was too dark. The sun was vibrant and high, but the sky was dark blue, almost black. And, after a second look, the sun seemed paler than usual, as though its light was being smothered under some cosmic bushel.

The crowd were silent, staring forward, craning to see. They were everywhere, pushing against him. He knew he shouldn't try to watch was happening, but he had to. Something inside him made him stand on the tips of his toes yearning for a glimpse. He noticed that everybody was the same, all clones of themselves or of some greater being. All wore black suits, bowler hats, Victorian handlebar moustaches, painted grins. It didn't strike him as odd

(because he knew then, or at least part of him knew, at the back of his mind, that this wasn't happening)

so he ignored it. Somebody came onto the stage in front of the crowd, and he was the same as everyone else. He started shouting senselessly. Craig couldn't hear what he was shouting, only that he was shouting. And it was all directed at him. Heads began to turn, bodies moving in to smother him. He couldn't breathe: the air simply wasn't there any more.

He woke up gasping in the darkness. Air whistled as it was sucked into his constricted, asthmatic throat. Feeling the hollow of his neck sucked inward with every breath, he reached over for his inhaler and put it into his mouth.

Something was in the mouthpiece. Something furry.

Something moving.

He put the bedside lamp on. The spider squeezed itself out of the mouthpiece and fell onto his lap, legs arched high above its head. It was heavier than it looked. He whimpered, and, looking round, noticed that the whole room was a rippling black mess: in his bed, on the floor, falling from the ceiling. All over him.

He screamed as he tried to brush them off his face, out of his hair. He fell backwards out of bed, his head-

-hitting the floor, and this time he was awake. The room was poorly lit in the wan light of the moon. He yelled for his mother until he heard her hurried shuffling footsteps on the stairs.

It took her a good ten minutes of encouragement even to get him

to open his eyes. Ten minutes of hugging him, stroking his hair and, "Ssh, come on now, it was only a dream".

Finally his halting breath, punctuated by tears, began to even out as he calmed down and she was able to tuck him back into bed before returning to try and pick up the threads of the Steve McQueen film.

He lay in bed, as still as death after her footsteps had worryingly faded into nothing. His bedside lamp was a lifeline in the darkness. The darkness that seethed as though waiting for the opportunity to come and suffocate him.

(ssh, come on now, it was)

His eyes darted to each corner of the room, searching for them, knowing they were there waiting for him to drop his guard before crawling out to him again.

(it was only a dream)

No. It was more. He knew. And that made her reassurances useless.

Morning was a long time coming.

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SCHOOL WAS a drag at the best of times. After a sleepless night it was less of a drag and more like a crawl. He managed to snatch about half an hour's sleep at lunchtime, and nodded off for a while during the second half of Mental Arithmetic. But that was nothing new for one of Miss Stirling's lessons and, at least, his tiredness was taking his mind off last night. All he had remembered this morning was a bad dream and being frightened in the darkness. The details had faded with the coming of daylight, and all he had been left with were two bloodshot eyes and the murmurs of a headache behind his temples. To cap it all, it was P.T. all afternoon with Mr Bentley and Craig had forgotten his kit.

There was no way he was going to parade himself up and down in his underwear. He had seen it happen to others in his situation and with a body as white and skinny as his, it was a fate worse than death.

He ran up and down the corridor a couple of times, until his breath was whistling conspicuously down his throat before presenting himself to Mr Bentley. He got sent home. Asthma wasn't all bad.

The house was empty when he got back. He got the spare key off a neighbour and let himself in. The house was silent, almost oppressively so, and that opened the window onto the night before: glimpses of what he had seen, as though watching it all through frosted glass. He stood in the hallway, the front door still ajar behind him, daring him to enter. He counted himself down.

Five four three two one GO IN.

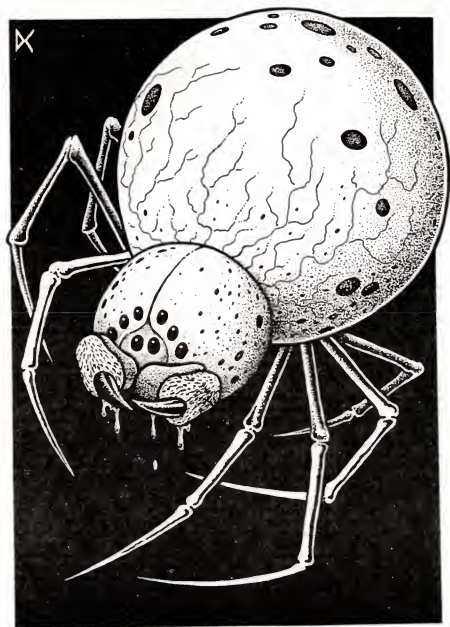
He took three steps forward without letting himself stop to think. Nothing was there. Of course, what had he expected? The

(spl...)

bogeyman hiding behind the door? He forced a laugh as he started to relax. The kitchen door to his right creaked open a couple of inches in the draught from the front door he had forgotten to shut. His heart lurched for a second. He half expected a dark figure to come creeping out of the shadows. He marched towards the kitchen to prove himself wrong. He pushed the wooden door, and as it slowly swung open in front of him he had an almost subliminal vision

(spiders!)

of what his dream had been about. The blinds were drawn in the



kitchen, and the room was half eaten by shadows. He heard the movement before his eyes had become accustomed to the dusk of the room.

And he knew.

He backed away, gasping, eyes wide. Crawling from the shadows, they followed. It was like his bedroom; they swarmed over every available surface. Nearer. Swamping his ankles.

His knees.

He fell over in his panic to get away, and just before he hit the ground he had time to register the tickle of their hairy bodies falling onto his face, and the creasing agony as they bit deep into the flesh of his thighs and crotch.

IN THE blackness a crash. He opened his eyes, already struggling against the pain. But the pain was gone.

"Craig?"

His mother came into view, crouching down to him, hands outstretched. His eyes clung to her, refusing to look back towards the kitchen.

"What's wrong, love? Have you banged your head?"

She explored with her fingers under his hair, smiling with relief as she found no tell-tale bumps. He watched her face as it broke open into a smile and she playfully ruffled his hair. But there were no reassurances in that smile, and her touch was the touch of spiders. He could feel them using his hair to make their webs. He pulled away in fear, his hands instinctively held high to brush them off. She jerked her hands away quickly, thinking she was hurting him.

"I'm sorry, love. Where does it hurt?" She vent to feel his head again, and this time he didn't pull away. There was nowhere to go. He could feel them in the kitchen, waiting in the shadows for him. He suffered her probing in silence. After a moment she stood up.

"I'll get some Witch Hazel. That'll take the soreness out of it." She vent into the kitchen and was gone before he could warn her. He pushed himself upright on his elbows. The kitchen was well lit in the spring afternoon. The blinds were open after all.

And the shadows were just shadows.

He began to cry.

-3-

HE DIDN'T tell his mother what he had seen. He knew what she would say: that he was being silly and

(it was only a dream)

imagining things. He knew the spiders had never been there. Not even the biggest spiders attack people. And they don't swarm together like that either. He knew. They'd learned about it in Nature at school.

No, it must have been because he was tired. His mum had told him that the brain could sometimes play tricks on you when you were tired. He didn't complain too much that evening when it was time for bed.

As he was lying alone in the disconcerting dark of his bedroom he fought with his mind to change the subject, but it wouldn't. As he drifted on the brink of sleep his mind's eye was filled with the image of a spider staring at him. A spider so close he could count its eyes and watch its body pulsate minutely.

THE SHOUTING Man was there again. No images this time, just the

hoarse rattle of an old voice. Craig writhed in his sleep as it got louder in his head, started to hurt his ears, even though he knew (only a dream)

that it couldn't hurt him. And it was getting worse. He jerked himself awake and lay in the dark feeling the sweat run from his forehead. His pillow was already wet. Echoes of the voice ran through his mind and he began to cry. He thought he would never be able to sleep again.

But, in his tears, he found what he was looking for. As the voice rebounded inside him, he began to listen. No, not just listen; he was able to hear.

- 4 -

ALL TOO soon his alarm clock dragged him from his sleep. He was still catching up on all he had lost the night before. He knew almost before he was awake that whatever it took, he wasn't going to school today. He rubbed his eyes and hyperventilated for a few moments to set himself off wheezing, and then called for his mother. She came in and only had to take one look at him to see he wasn't well. He told her he had a migraine and she believed him. He knew she would. He had been dogged by illness for as long as he could remember, always taking days off school, and he had soon learned to use this to his advantage. As long as he didn't try it on too often he could usually get away with it.

He waited for his mother to go to work before getting out of bed. He would have to be quick: she only worked mornings on Wednesdays. He went downstairs, tentative at first, jumping at every shadow, holding on to the bannister for more than one kind of support. He knew they would be waiting for him.

He explored all the rooms downstairs and was surprised when they weren't there. That's not what the voice had told him. He sat in the lounge waiting for them to appear, but they refused to show themselves. But this time it didn't matter. When they came he would be ready for them. Satisfied, he went back to bed to wait.

He awoke to hear his mother talking downstairs. He crept to the landing, debating whether to go down. She was on the phone.

"Of course, it would have to be today," she was saying. "We'll probably have to call it off. I'll see how he is later on, but we can't have all those people round making a noise if he's ill in bed. Hang on, I think he's coming down now. Look, I'll speak to you later, OK?"

She put the phone down as Craig walked into the lounge rubbing his temple.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"Just your Auntie Emma. We were going to have a bit of a do tonight, but if you're not well..."

Suddenly he felt guilty. "I'm feeling a lot better now actually. Don't call anything off for me." She raised her eyebrows, and he continued, "Honest, my headache's practically gone. I'll be OK upstairs with my door shut."

"Well, if you're sure..."

He nodded. She picked up the phone to call her sister back. "OK," she said as she was dialling. "You go back to bed. I'll bring you some lunch up in a minute."

He smiled and went upstairs. He was asleep when she brought him the food. She let him sleep.

He was there again, his shout louder and more painful. It was the last warning. This time, they wouldn't fail him.

THEY CAME.

Crawling from the shadows en masse, they resembled an army. His army. Craig wasn't surprised by them. He had been warned. No, not surprised. Just scared. Even though he knew
(only a dream)

he wasn't in danger. Not yet.

The black wave swept towards his bed. He tried to back away, but there was nowhere to go. He had to let them crawl over him, explore him. Wherever he ran, they would be there waiting for him.

He wanted to be sick. They were everywhere and all he could do was sit there, eyes tightly squeezed shut, praying for them to leave him alone.

He finally cracked when he felt them inside him, crawling up his throat, into his mouth, their hairy bodies brushing inside him, making him choke. He started to heave violently, and he watched, horrified, as the spiders fell from his mouth in a seemingly endless stream. Their chewed and mangled bodies lay before him like a half-finished meal.

A noise in his room pulled him mercifully from sleep. His father was leaning over him.

"Craig?" he was saying. "Craig, are you all right?"

Craig nodded slowly. "It was only a dream," he said. "They can't hurt me when I'm asleep." He grimaced, still tasting them. His father straightened up.

"That's right," he said. "They can't hurt you while you're asleep. Now you just go back to sleep, and don't let a silly little dream frighten you."

"I won't."

Smiling, his father left him.

"It's not the dreams I'm frightened of," muttered Craig to himself. Downstairs, he could hear guests arriving. He got up and, after thoroughly checking his room, he went out onto the landing.

All the upstairs rooms were empty, which meant only one thing. He knew they were here somewhere. They had come to him in his dream, where they couldn't hurt him, and now they were looking for him in his house, where they could kill him. The voice had said they were here, in the house as well as in his head.

And if they weren't upstairs, then they had to be with his parents and all their friends. His eyes filled with tears as his imagination ran. His mind's eye focused on a lounge full of corpses overrun by spiders with loudly clacking mandibles. He thought he could hear the voice laughing.

Slowly, he crept downstairs. The door to the lounge was ajar, and through the crack he could see people everywhere, sat in chairs and on the floor. Music was playing and the people were laughing at some joke. But he wasn't watching them. His eyes were on the shadows that danced in the light of candles.

Danced with life.

As Craig watched, they began to emerge from the darkness, scurrying across the floor into pools of light that seemed to reflect off their bodies. Nobody else saw them. The shadows shrank like pregnant bellies shed of their young. He looked up, and they were on the door he was leaning against, starting to drop onto him. Frantically, he tried to brush them off, but there were too many. The laughter in the lounge seemed to change, merge. It became the cackle of an old man. They were on his face, biting deep into him. He could feel punctured flesh beginning to swell.

He turned and ran out through the front door, into the shocking

cold of the night. As soon as he was away from the house the spiders fell away. They began to make their way back to the lounge and his parents. Others waited on the threshold, wanting him.

He was alone, scared. The party carried on inside, oblivious, while he stood outside like a shivering tramp with his face pressed against the glass. He didn't know what to do. He backed away until he found himself leaning against the icy metal of the garage door. He went inside to get out of the wind.

THEY DIDN'T hear Craig leaving over the noise of the music. The party continued. People were starting to get drunk, losing their inhibitions. Despite half-hearted attempts to keep them quiet, they were becoming increasingly raucous.

Somebody suggested a party game.

Most of the guests arranged themselves into two lines, and, without using their hands, tried to pass an egg back along the line. Emma was second from the back. She clasped the egg too tightly under her chin and it broke, spilling cold yolk down the inside of her dress.

She screamed with delight.

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SCREAMS.

Panic finally galvanised him into action. Fear was strangling his thoughts; his mind was a jumbled mess of impulses. He was deaf to the repeated whimpering that came from his lungs with each difficult breath. He ran in circles, desperately searching for a weapon. He stumbled across a scarlet petrol can, spraining his ankle as he tripped over it.

Fire.

He grasped the can to his chest and limped out of the garage, crying to himself in pain and terror. The cold bit through his thin pyjamas. As he ran into the house he unscrewed the top of the can. He could hear laughter. Ordinary, friendly, human laughter. His subconscious made a final grasp at sanity

(what's happening, they shouldn't be laughing)

(ssh, come on now)

but it was too late. The petrol glimmered like diamonds as it sprayed across the room towards half a dozen candles. Towards his parents.

The room erupted in white fury and Craig was blown through the doorway. They were screaming again. But it was up to them now. He had done all he could.

CRAIG HUDDLED against the hollow in the grass. On the other side of the field he could see the start of the estate. A shimmering yellow glow hung in the air.

He was shivering so hard it hurt his chest. His asthma was making breathing almost impossible. His hands were beginning to hurt. He held them up in front of his face and looked at the swollen, purple mess. It didn't matter.

He had done all he could.

He hugged his knees tighter to his chest and watched forlornly as the shadows grew across the field towards him. He retreated into the only defence he had left.

He slept.

THE PET PEEVE

RICK KLEFFEL

Illustrated by Jim Pitts

ED MORTON forced himself to fake a big smile as he answered the door. He wouldn't have minded seeing Susan Brand, the neighbourhood divorcee, alone. But peeking out the front window, he saw that she'd brought her daughter Billie, who was fidgeting on the doorstep. Susan was a slim, attractive and (as far as Ed knew) available blonde, but her daughter was a skinny, six-year old holy terror with long brown hair ("Like my Dad's") and a talent for pointing out the ugly side of things.

"Hi Ed!" Susan's smile almost mitigated the fact that she'd brought her daughter with her. "May we come in?"

"Sure. Hi Billie... Yeah." He stood aside, gesturing awkwardly for them to enter.

"It smells in here," Billie whined as they entered.

"Billie!" her mother hissed.

"Have a seat," Ed muttered, gesturing vaguely to the slouching couch. Neither of them moved towards the sand coloured, clothes-covered piece of furniture. Had he known someone was coming, he would have picked up, sprayed some air freshener, combed his stringy, black hair, and certainly changed his clothes into something less shapeless than his habitual outfit of cords, a t-shirt and a lab coat. He would have spent the entire week shaping things up. "Can I get you something to drink?" he asked. "Some water?" He smiled, then shook it away, knowing that his smile only managed to make him look goofier than he did naturally. They stood there, looking uncomfortable. Ed had first met Susan at the Danbys' batskin party, but the melee caused by the flatfish - one of his first pets - had embarrassed everybody.

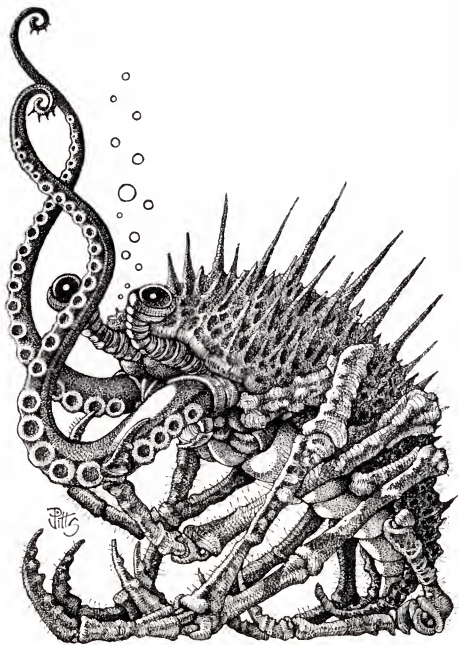
"Got any coke?" Billie blurted out suddenly, trying to crane her neck and see into the kitchen.

"Billie!" Susan snapped at her daughter. She took a deep breath and continued on, her pained smile serving only to confirm her discomfort. "No thanks, Ed. I'm sorry to bother you but, uh - we heard that you know a lot about pets, and might even have a salt water aquarium." So, Ed wanted to say, what's the point? Susan sounded as if she wasn't sure whether she wanted to be here and she fully intended to take it out on Billie. Well, better the kid than me, Ed thought.

"I've got this school project," Billie whined, looking guiltily at the ground. Of course, Ed thought, here it comes, the point, they're not here to visit, they're here here to-

"I'm not going to tell you again young lady." Susan's exasperation with her daughter was rapidly becoming a source of exasperation to Ed.

"It's OK." Ed tried not to stare at Susan's legs, then found himself staring at her chest, so he raised his head as if something were happening behind her. Damn. "And you thought-"



"Maybe you could help us out." Susan shifted in a manner that Ed found provocative, but suspected was not meant to be taken that way. "You do have a lot of real weird pets, don't you?"

"I wouldn't say weird, no, maybe rare, but yes, I do have a couple of salt-water aquariums." Finally, Ed thought, the point. And one I can deal with, at that. He tried to look serious, but was only barely able to keep himself from grinning. He had a new pet he was just dying to show off.

"Is that why it smells so bad in here?" The kid just wasn't gonna give up.

"Billie! One more word and we're outta here, do you understand me young lady?" Susan raised her eyebrows in frustration as her daughter huffed and puffed. "It's just that, Alicia - Alicia Danby - at her batskin party, she mentioned that you had a big collection of pets. And that - thing you had?"

"The flatfish?" Ed prompted.

"Yeah, that. It was a fish kind of thing, and I thought you might have sea shells, you know, to decorate the aquarium?"

"I take it Billie needs to bring a pet to school?" Ed was on top of things now. The kid ignored him, clearly feeling guilty about something. Susan closed her eyes briefly, as if praying, then opened them and launched into what was obviously a prepared speech.

"No, not a pet, a sea shell will do. Billie" - Susan paused to look reproachfully at her daughter - "just came home today and announced that she's supposed to bring a sea shell tomorrow for science day. Since I thought you had the salt water aquariums, and the landlords won't let us have pets, I thought you might have a sea shell, you know, a decoration you could loan us. It would really help Billie's grades" - she directed another sharp look at her daughter - "if she could bring something kind of, well unusual." Silently, Billie rose from the couch and drifted towards the half-filled aquarium that stood next to Ed's TV set.

"A one of a kind, kind of thing?" Ed asked, looking sideways at the girl. Somehow the kid had homed in on his newest, most unstable pet. Ed had no idea how it would behave, or how long it would live. It could shrivel up and die in an hour, or maybe live for years. God knows, the flatfish was pretty hardy.

"Like this Mom! Look at this gross thing!" She tapped the aquarium glass with her finger.

"Billie! Stop that!" Susan rose gracefully from the couch and joined her daughter as Ed stepped awkwardly past the coffee table, knocking some magazines to the floor. Picking them up, he hurried over, and pushed the TV stand aside so he could join them.

"That's really weird Ed," Susan mused. "What is it?"

"I call it my pet peeve," he said seriously.

"What's a peeve?" Billie whined.

"Oh, come on Ed," Susan said smiling. She looked at him like he had to be kidding. "It's a crab, right?"

Well, she was close. It looked like a crab. Sort of. But the top of the shell was covered with spines that rose from two to three inches in height and coloured a mottle green on black that changed slowly while they watched. Underneath, it was a pale off-white. In addition to the eight legs of a normal crab, it had two octopus-like tentacles that hung suspended in the shallow water. The eyes were tiny pink bulbs on stalks. They twitched, following Billie's face as she hovered over the peeve.

"This is what smells so rank," Billie snorted. "But look at it change colours..."

"Like an octopus, you know. They change colours too, to match their environment. But this is a kind of a rare tide pool animal," Ed explained, lying. Actually, it'd just come out of the incubator last week. But even though he like Susan, he wasn't quite ready to explain to her just yet that he made pets, using equipment he'd pirated from the collapse of Geneco. Especially since they didn't always turn out so well.

She looked at the peeve suspiciously, as if she thought he was trying to play her for a fool. "It's got tentacles. Is it an octopus?"

"Can I take it to school Mom?"

"Pipe down Billie. Ed, is this an octopus, a crab, or what?"

Yes, Ed thought. He had to think fast, something he didn't do so well around women he liked. It's an "or what", he thought, waiting for inspiration. It didn't come. Susan stared at him, waiting. Finally, the silence became unbearable and he blurted out, "Haven't you ever seen these on National Geographic?"

"It looks more like the Alien if you ask me," Billie whined.

"Now, this is a joke, is it Ed? Are you teasing me?" Susan asked warily. She looked mad, confused, as if she were ready to pack it up right now, if he didn't spit it out. But he couldn't say, "I made it in my garage out of left over material from the gene-splicing factory," could he? That wouldn't go over very well.

"Ed?" An edge creeping into her voice...

"No, no," he said, trying to sound sincere when he knew he sounded panicky, "they originated in Australia, and then in the sixties drug runners brought them back accidentally."

Susan was having none of it. "Drug runners from Australia?" She shook her head ever so slightly. "Come on Ed."

Too late, Ed realised the preposterousness of his story. But now he was stuck with it. As if to aid him, the peeve moved suddenly, the tentacle rising briefly out of the water. "Wanna see it eat?" he asked suddenly, hoping that it was hungry. That would derail this disastrous train-wreck of a conversation. He headed for the kitchen, hoping this retreat would cut things off at their source.

"All right!" Billie was finally making herself useful.

"Just a minute..." Ed slipped into the kitchen before he could be called back.

"Drug runners from Australia?" Susan repeated.

"That's what they said on the special," Ed asserted, shouting from the kitchen. He lowered his voice as he return to the aquarium. "Of course, I don't believe everything I see on TV," he said.

"Good. I'm impressed," Susan rejoined.

"Are you gonna-"

"Sssh," Ed hissed, putting his finger to his lips. Carefully, he laid the piece of bologna in the water. An oily looking stain slid across the surface as the peeve moved towards the meat. Without warning, the tentacles whipped forward and seized the meat and dragged it towards the pincers. When the meat was firmly in the claws, the peeve raised the slice above it's back and swiftly dragged it down, impaling the helpless lunch meat on the spines.

Billie squealed with delight. "Oh yeah! Yeeee-uk!"

Ed couldn't help but smile with pride.

"Oooh! That's horrible!" Susan said, obviously repulsed, but still interested.

"I bet it does that with fish, right?" Billie chirped, hardly able to stand still. "Like it, it sticks 'em."

"Are you sure it's legal to own one of these things?" Susan

asked, concerned. She put her arms protectively around Billie, who still managed to squirm away.

"Oh yeah, perfectly harmless, it's just, you know, unique, survival, and stuff. You know, Billie," he said trying to divert her attention, "I've got these flatfish..."

"Yeah, yeah, we've all seen your flatfish. They look like smashed lizards."

"Billie!"

"Mom, if I take this to school, I know I'll get an A."

"Now Billie, I don't know if it's safe, and this thing is probably very valuable."

"Of course it's safe Mom! I could smash it with a basketball."

Susan rolled her eyes. "Well, you know she always has been kind of a tomboy," she explained.

"That's really great," Billie continued, ignoring Ed and Susan as she stared at the peeve. "No-one else has one of those, I bet. Can I take it, Ed, please?" Ed thought that all of a sudden Billie was starting to sound kind of sweet. The peeve stirred, bumping up against the side of the aquarium.

"I'm sure Mr Morton has a nice sea shell or something," Susan said, even though her eyes made it perfectly clear she wasn't sure. "Besides, this thing is alive Billie."

"Well..." Ed hesitated. The peeve really might be unstable, though it was certainly harmless. It probably wouldn't die, dissolve or dismember itself. And it could easily live in a goldfish bowl.

"Billie, let's go," Susan stated, suddenly decisive. "I don't think this was such a good idea after all." She took the girl's hand and straightened up, as a hard smile took hold of her lips.

I'm losing her! Ed thought desperately. He'd thought for sure that he'd set the hook when he showed them the peeve. Now, he'd built the thing up too much, and Susan was wary of borrowing something too valuable. "I don't see the harm," he said, swallowing. "You could borrow the peeve, for your school project. But only for one night."

"Really?" Billie said, the first polite word out of her mouth so far.

"Well, I could help you bring it, you know," Ed said, realising the trap he'd set for himself. "It's not fussy, I'll just throw it in a goldfish bowl..."

"That's too much trouble, Ed, never mind." Though Susan spoke sternly, Ed could see he had her interest. It was just like fishing, he thought, throwing out a lure...

"No trouble, I'm kind of proud of the beast, anyway." You're laying it too thick, he told himself. "It's not rare or valuable, or anything. They're not in demand at pet stores yet." Finally, he was telling at least some semblance of the truth. As he approached firm ground, he began to feel more comfortable. "Your show and tell is in the morning?" he asked.

"Yeah! This would be great. This thing's really weird," Billie gushed, practically whirling. "Can I Mom, can I take it?"

"It's no problem, if you think it'll help her grades." Ed felt like a consummate fisherman, playing out his line, carefully, carefully now, she's nibbling...

"You're sure you want to do this?" Ed saw Susan trying to lower her stake in the deal, but was beyond caring. He felt almost as giddy as the kid.

"Oh, it's no problem," he chortled. Especially when Mom is so attractive, he added to himself.

Susan pulled Billie back from the aquarium. She didn't seem happy about this, Ed could tell, but trapped and indebted was better than nothing. He hadn't reeled her in but the hook was firmly set.

"All right! All right! See Mom, I told you he'd do it! He likes you!" Susan, clearly embarrassed, dragged her daughter back towards the door.

Ed politely ignored Billie and kept himself from grinning with glee. Now he was in control. "Kids," he muttered, smiling. "Excuse me, I'll go get a little goldfish bowl." He slipped into the hallway back towards his garage.

"Are you sure, Ed?" Susan called out behind him. She obviously wanted to give him every chance he needed to back out, to make it clear she didn't need this favour.

Stepping silently, Ed slipped into the bathroom and swept a comb through his hair. He stepped back out, almost running, but trying not make a ruckus as he pushed open the back door and went to the garage. The creatures floating in the rows of aquariums seemed jolly, almost laughing like he was. Even the tube of meat, covered with gelatin-like slime, just laying there pulsing, seemed positively jovial. Under the workbench, he found exactly what he was looking for, a dirty plastic turtle home, the kind of thing you gave to kids with ten-cent painted turtles. Beside, almost buried in the dust, he even found the pink plastic palm tree. "Ha ha, ha ha, ha ha!" He felt like Dr Frankenstein asking out the Bride of Frankenstein. Hell, he thought, I am like Dr Frankenstein! He burst into the kitchen and headed for the sink. "Just a minute!" Moving the morning's dishes out of the sink he turned on the water, into the plastic tank.

"You sure this is OK Ed? I mean, if you just have a sea shell, that would probably do the trick." Ed made special note of the word "probably".

"This is just fine!" he said, then grimaced, realising that his enthusiasm was shoving. Still, he could easily feel nearly almost welcome to ask Susan out to dinner when she returned the ppeeve. I mean, he wondered madly, why not? The caked on dirt and cobwebs were rapidly falling off the 'turtle-arium'. She came over to ask him something. She could've asked anybody for a sea shell, but she'd asked him. Oh sure, maybe he was making too much out of it, but when she really saw that ppeeve, it was a great pet. Still new, yeah, but if it held up overnight, and she liked it, maybe he could give it to her.

"Do you need any help?" She leaned into the kitchen, perhaps trying to look for signs of regret on Ed's part.

Ed jerked the plastic container out from under the water, spraying Susan with droplets. "Sorry," he said, chagrinned. "All done!" He grabbed some table napkins to dry it with. They practically melted as they met the water, and he threw six sodden lumps into the trash before the dish was dry. Ceremoniously, he plugged the palm tree into the dish. "Ta da!"

"That's corny, Mom," Billie said.

"Billie, you're not being very nice." Susan seemed embarrassed by both Ed and Billie, but neither seemed to care.

Ed breezed by her, then joined Billie by the aquarium. "Now I'm going to pick him up," he said, "but--"

"It's a him?" Billie asked.

"It's a him," Ed replied patiently. You've got to be nice to the kid, he thought. That'll get some points, maybe make up for the mess and the smell. "As I was saying, I'll pick him up, but you

shouldn't touch him." Ed dipped the dish into the aquarium and allowed some of the brackish water to drain inside. "He'll like to sit in the water."

Ed felt a thrill creep up his spine as Susan stepped up behind him. He could smell her perfume. He wondered if he should ask her what she wore, but thought better of it. He carefully set the turtle-arium next to the aquarium, then reached inside and gingerly picked up the peeve. As he lifted it out of the water, its tentacles clung to his fingers, as if it were afraid of where it was going. "It's OK girl," he said soothingly.

"I thought you said it was a boy," Billie said.

"It is," Ed replied as he set the peeve down in the dish.

"Can it climb out of that dish, Ed?" Susan asked, playing the concerned mother.

Ed hadn't considered that possibility. This particular species had started out as a sea urchin, though, and hadn't shown any interest in escaping yet. Then again, could it have escaped from the larger aquarium? He thought not. He pretended not to hear her, studying the peeve with intense concentration. Of course, it was attracted to warmth. That was why he kept the water warm. Still, that shouldn't be a problem. What if it gets loose in her house? he wondered. Then, smiling, he answered his own question: Why, I'll have to go over and help her look for it.

"Well, Ed?" Susan said, her impatience showing.

"Nyeaahh..." He shook his head slowly. "He likes water too much to leave." That was probably true. "Here," he said, picking up the dish and offering it to Billie, "your very own pet peeve."

"Ed." Susan shook her head. She obviously didn't believe his story about the drug runners from Australia. Too bad. Like people who talk in the movies, it was his pet peeve. "Thank Mr Morton, Billie," she warned her daughter.

"Thaaaannnk-yooou," Billie sing-songed in a snotty tone.

"Billie, honey, we'd better get back. I've still got to make dinner." She smiled at him. "Thanks Ed. We'll have your" - another smile - "pet peeve back tomorrow after school." She lead Billie out the door with a look of regret on her face. But she'd be back, Ed thought.

He leaned in the doorway and watched them walk down the street until they were almost out of earshot. As he closed his door he heard Susan's voice, distinct, piercing: "Be careful with that, young lady." It was his turn to smile.

BILLIE AWOKE to the sound of delicate tapping - like someone hitting a pencil on the desk at school. She tucked her knees up into her chest, snuggling under her electric blanket. That Morton was a world-class geek, but his pet peeve was totally cool. There it was again - that tapping. Probably her mother tip-toeing around the house. But it sounded like it was in her room. She looked up at the ugly plastic bowl that Morton had given her with the peeve. Funny, it didn't look like the peeve was in there. If it wasn't, she'd find herself in deep doogie doo-doo. Suddenly scared, she sat up and saw the peeve crawling towards her across the bureau. The spines and shell were a mottled brown. The legs kept moving even when it reached the edge. She saw its mouth on the pale underside, a beak surrounded by small, suckered tentacles. Tiny hairs protruded from the joints in the legs. As it fell over the edge of the bureau and onto her bed, she screamed.

SUSAN AWOKE to the sound of her daughter's scream. Damn it, she

thought groggily, damn it. I knew I shouldn't have borrowed that damn peeve from Morton. "I'm coming, Billie, I'm coming," she shouted. If I kill it to protect my daughter, he'll probably still want the couple of hundred bucks such salt-water oddities cost in aquarium stores. And then he's real likely to ask me out, right? She pushed open her door, ran down the hallway, then wrenched open the door to her daughter's room. "Billie..."

"Oh Mom, Mom, it fell and hurt itself," Billie cried. She was still under the covers, at the opposite edge of the bed from the peeve. It was floundering on the electric blanket, the brown slowly fading to a pink that matched the blanket. One of its legs was bent and two of the upper spines were broken. Both were oozing a brown-streaked liquid.

"Get away from it this instant," Susan ordered, dragging her daughter out of bed. In the process she broke off two more of the spines.

"But Mom, it wasn't trying to hurt me." Billie crossed her arms and pouted. "I think it just wanted to get warm."

"Damn it, Billie," Susan moaned, looking at the wreckage of the peeve. "Why did you have to do that?"

"Well Mom, you were the one who suggested it. I could tell you like Mr Morton, but I can't see why. He's kinda cute, but he's a geek."

"Billie - butt out."

"All right Mom," her daughter whined. "But what are we gonna do about this?"

ED AWOKE to the sound of his own voice. "I'm not here right now, leave a message."

"Ed Morton." It was Susan. "Answer the phone!" She was shouting, he realised. What time was it? 4:28. Oh Jesus. "ANSWER THE PHONE!"

He fumbled for the phone, dropped it, and heard Susan's tiny voice on the floor. "Ed? Ed? Don't you dare hang up on me!"

He grabbed the phone, pushed back his hair, and sat up in bed. "I'm sorry, I dropped the phone. What's the matter?"

"Your creature tried to attack my daughter."

What? The peeve couldn't...

"Are you sure?" he asked, trying to sound reasonable.

"And now it's injured and dying, and NO I am not going to pay you one red cent for it." The silence that followed practically paraded out of the phone.

"Why don't I come over and take a look?" I get to go to Susan Brand's house at 4:30 in the morning, he thought.

"Well, you'd better hurry. I think it's gonna die. I think you should take it to the tide pools and let it go."

What? That would be a disaster. God only knew what the peeve would do in the tide pools. Probably up and die, but that's what they thought about the walking catfish in Florida. "Don't worry, I can take care of it," he said, trying to sound reasonable and in control. "I'll be over in about fifteen minutes."

"You know the house right? Five doors down on your left, with the BMX bike in the driveway? I'll leave the porch light on." She hung up without saying goodbye. Damn, Ed thought, damn. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all. I thought she'd like the peeve, especially since her daughter did. He put down the phone and stared at the floor stupidly, then shook his head. He had to take a shower, get dressed, look presentable. He didn't have any time to sit around looking stupid. He'd already spent enough time looking stupid.

SHE WAS waiting for him on the porch, arms folded, looking cross. Maybe it's just a ruse, he thought - the best defense is a good offense. He smiled as he walked up the path. "Hi," he said cheerily.

"It's in here," Susan replied brusquely. She was wearing the world's tightest blue jeans, and did them justice, he mused. She ushered him into the tiny house. The furniture was old, well-worn, comfortable looking. She moved him right through the living room, to the adjacent dining room, and gestured towards a battered table. Billie was sitting behind a box of cereal, also fully dressed. The turtle-arium was on the table, and in the centre was the peeve. It was ruined. He couldn't help but draw in his breath suddenly, and noticed how both Billie and Susan winced when he did so. But his peeve, his pet peeve, was a mess; how could he...

"We think you should take it down to the tidepools and let it go," Susan said, now a little calmer.

"What happened?" Ed asked. He poked at the peeve causing a tentacle to rise briefly, then fall.

"It tried to get into bed with me. It jumped right on top of my electric blanket," Billie said from the background.

"It liked heat, damn. That was one of the best pets I'd ever made," Ed muttered.

"Made? What do you mean, made?" Susan knew there was something fishy going here. Ed had worked for Geneco until they went bust after losing that big government wheat contract.

Ed cringed inwardly. How stupid could he be. "I mean, you know, I brought it up, and stuff..." He shrugged sheepishly, not wanting anybody to suspect he had a garage full of hand-made monsters in aquariums. Watch your mouth, boy, he thought.

Susan eyed him suspiciously. Ed wasn't sure why, but maybe suspicious was OK in this case.

"Well I better take it home," Ed spurted, trying to fill the threatening silence that was developing.

"Why don't you take it down to the tidepools," she suggested. "I mean, Treasure Cove has some decent tidepools. I'll drive the three of us. After all, that's where it came from, right? I mean - it's not like you really made it, right?" She smiled, knowing she'd just scored some kind of victory, but unsure just what the prize was.

Ed gulped. She knows, he thought, or she suspects. I'll just take it down- But what about the walking catfish? his mind said. Your pet peeve could really wreak havoc with a delicate ecosystem like the Californian tidepools. What if it somehow managed to inter-breed with the sea urchins? You could cause a coastal disaster. The only way to save the peeve is to take it home. The only way to save this - well, non-relationship - is to take the thing down and put it in the pools. The I'd have to kill it, or make sure it was dead. My pet peeve.

"Nah," he said, "I guess that's the only decent thing. Let's take-"

"My car," Susan said, knowing somehow that Ed Morton was a crappy driver.

"No, I have to get to work early today. I don't have the seniority at Mutech I used to have at Geneco," he said, thinking quickly for once in his life. "We'll take separate cars, cause I'd have to go directly to work. Really, you don't have to go."

"We'll follow you," she said, handing him the turtle-arium. "Honey, get on your jacket."

"Mom, do I have to go?"

"Now!"

ED HURRIED from the base of the cliffs towards the tidepools. He thanked his lucky stars and his terrible driving habits that he had been able to run the yellow light at Fellowship, leaving Susan behind. The sun was just rising in the hills behind the cliffs, throwing the beach into a grey, soft shadow. It was mercilessly cold, and thankfully clear. A small pile of clouds over the ocean caught the orange morning light. He had to force himself to slow down as he reached the pools, and glanced fearfully over his shoulder. Nobody was there yet. Nearly all the water had slopped out of the turtle-arium on his drive here. The peeve looked sorrier than ever. Thank God it's low tide, he thought.

He approached a tidepool, walked gingerly around the exposed mussels and barnacles, and squatted down on the rock, shivering. He set the turtle-arium down on the pool's edge, then grit his teeth and reached into the water. He grabbed a medium-size rock, easily big enough to do the job.

"Bye, bye, pet peeve," he said. He held the rock over it, but couldn't, not yet. He'd just let it go, walk around for a little while. Then he could drop the rock on it while it was in the tidepool. No harm done to see how it would do in the environment - well, it was not what it had been designed for, but from which it had been developed. He set the rock down next to the tidepool, then slowly lowered the turtle-arium into the water. The peeve retracted into its shell as the cold water rushed in. Sorry, guy, Ed thought. No way to buffer this. As he held the dish under the water, the plastic palm tree floated out, then fell unevenly to the tidepool floor. A large sea slug ignored it, sliding past. Just when Ed thought the shock had killed the peeve, it emerged, then lifted itself out of the plastic dish and let itself fall towards a small patch of sand on the bottom of the pool. A minnow swam up to the sinking peeve to investigate. Without hesitation, the tentacles whipped out, caught the fish, and handed it to the claws which impaled it on the spikes on its back, but it left the fish there as it sank to the bottom. Ed blinked, shocked by the peeve's recovery. Maybe it hadn't liked the warm water in its tank at home. And why wasn't it eating the minnow? He would have guessed it would be hungry.

As the peeve lay there, a larger fish came swimming closer to investigate the still struggling minnow. As soon as it came within range the tentacles lashed out, and impaled the larger fish on top of the minnow. This one it then removed from the spines. Standing up on its legs, it pushed the larger fish down into the sand, then settled down on top of it and began devouring. Ed laughed with glee. The damn thing was smart, really smart. It could wipe out all the fish-

He remembered the rock he held in his hand, and why it was there. As much as he loved his pet peeve, he really didn't want to wipe out the tidepools. "Poor guy," he said, "you liked warm things - you just didn't want to be warm." I'll make another one of you, he promised. He let go of the rock, watched it zig-zag towards the bottom, then looked away, behind him, towards the cliffs, to see the silhouettes of a woman and child backlit by the rising sun.



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